

**TERROR
IN
JEHANABAD
(BIHAR)
*A REPORT***

**PEOPLE'S UNION
FOR
DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS**

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TERROR IN JEHANABAD (BIHAR)

"The Team has no hesitation in recording that at the heart of the problem lies the desperation of the poor and the lowly and their loss of faith in the established order to come to their aid and mete out social and economic justice to them"

**Report of Central Government Team which visited
"extremist affected" areas in central Bihar in
May, 1988**

In 1986 Jehanabad was upgraded from a sub-division of Gaya District to a full fledged district in its own right. It was believed that the conferring of a District status to Jehanabad would enable the government to intervene more effectively in the "extremist" activities prevalent in the area. It should be noted in this connection that what the Government calls "extremist" activities are in fact popular agitations by the people of Jehanabad for a right to live with a bare amount of dignity, a right to receive minimum wages, and a right to be freed from the regimes of landlord armies. None of these rights are such that are not validated in the Constitution of India. Even the Baijal Committee set up by the government to investigate into "extremist" activities in this region recorded that the demands of the peasants are "still extremely modest". Two organisations are in the forefront of the struggles of the poor peasants. One is the Indian People's Front (IPF), or to be more precise its mass front,

the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS); and the other is the Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti (MKSS). These organisations have links with CPI(ML) Liberation Group, and the CPI(ML) Party Unity Group, respectively.

In the past year and a half, the state government, with active intervention of the Central government, launched a new offensive to crush "extremist influences" in the central districts of Bihar. This offensive has taken the form of a twin-pronged strategy combining on the one hand a strong police presence, and on the other hand an accelerated thrust on general development goals, such as redistribution of land, improving transport infrastructure, providing houses etc., to the weaker sections, and so on. These two arms are code named *Operation Rakshak* and *Operation Siddharth* respectively. While *Operation Siddharth* is confined to Gaya, Aurangabad and Jehanabad districts, *Rakshak* covers 7 districts. The seven central Bihar districts which have been identified are Patna, Nalanda, Bhojpur, Rohtas, Gaya, Aurangabad and Jehanabad (Annexure 1 gives details). The Union Ministry of Home Affairs, under whose guidance the operation was planned, has identified 27 blocks in 7 districts as "extremist affected". The Bihar government however claims that 41 blocks in these seven districts are "extremist-affected", and in addition has identified 11 blocks in 7 more districts as "extremist affected". Reportedly the state government asked for 12 battalions of paramilitary forces to police this area. The central government however thought that four would be sufficient. According to the Secretary (Home) there are 30 companies deployed at present of which 15 companies are posted in Jehanabad alone. According to the S.P. of Jehanabad district there are, over and above the Bihar police, 2 companies of the Border Security Force, 1 company of the CRPF, and 10 companies of the Bihar Military Police (BMP). In addition, force from Gujarat Special Reserve Police have also been requisitioned. There is at least one battalion of the Border Security Force in the Central Bihar Area.

Alongside, there has been a dramatic strengthening of the district police. The Central team, led by senior officers of the

Central government including the Secretary (Planning) Mr. Baijal. reported that by May 1988, the 7 districts had 3 range DIGs. Each of the 90 affected police stations were provided one full section of special armed police. One additional sub-inspector has been provided per police station. Twenty four assistant sub-inspectors, 72 Havaldars and 282 constables have been provided to augment the police forces in each of the district of Gaya, Aurangabad and Jehanabad. Fifteen additional companies of the BMP have been recruited and are under training. One hundred and fifty armed pickets have been set up in these areas. Two hundred and ninety one new vehicles have been provided to the police. The intelligence Bureau has also been asked to assist the State government in strengthening the special branch. The S.P. of Jehanabad went on to inform us that 52 new police pickets have been created in Jehanabad district alone. To accommodate the new increase in police presence, schools, primary health centres, and other public buildings have been taken over. In Arrain village, for example, the primary school is a BSF Camp. But the most glaring example is the Jehanabad hospital. This has been taken over by the BSF. We could not find a patient or hospital staff in it. According to the Lok Sangram Morcha, there are 74 such police camps where 2,574 jawans of the paramilitary forces are stationed.

At the same time large amounts of money are being pumped into the district. According to press reports, nearly Rs. 80 crore has been earmarked for Operation Siddarth. The Central Government Team reported that approximately Rs. 40 crores had been released for employment generation programmes to 105 blocks in the Central Bihar Districts in 1987-88. The 7 affected districts were also covered by a special Area programme under which 9.25 crores have been allocated.

Almost to the hour that Jehanabad was declared a district, the administration also banned the MKSS in whole of Bihar. Since then another organisation called Mazdoor Kisan Mukti Manch has also become active in this area. It is believed that the banned

MKSS has set up this new organisation in order to enable it to conduct popular mass activities of the peasants in Bihar. Jehanabad was for several years gripped by mass protest which on many occasions ended violently with a large number of peasants losing their lives to landlord and police repression. The last great massacre in Jehanabad, while still part of Gaya district, was the infamous and widely reported incident at Arwal on April 19, 1986. In the Arwal massacre 21 lives were lost when the police, without provocation, fired on an assembly of peasants gathered under the banner of MKSS in the compound of the Gandhi Library. The manner in which the trapped peasants were shot and killed reminded one of the Jalianwala Bagh massacre. To cover up for the brutality of this incident the government promptly banned the MKSS and later set up Jehanabad as a district. Yet the government did not bother to order a judicial enquiry into the massacre. In fact, Mr S.B. Sahay who was at that time DGP Bihar, was reported to have boasted of the police performance in Arwal, though he also felt that not all members of the police force acted with equal alacrity. Many were silent bystanders, he complained, while MKSS activists were treated as heroes in open public meetings (EPW, August 10, 1986, p. 815).

Over the past decade a large number of peasants have lost their lives to landlord and police terror. The figures supplied by PUDR on the basis of press reports alone are revealing. Between 1980 and July 1984 at least 45 people were killed in landlord-police violence in Gaya district, of which at least 32 were in the Jehanabad sub-division. Between January 1984 to April 1986 at least 36 people were killed, out of which 21 people were killed in the infamous Arwal firing alone. Since then, that is from April 1986 till today, a minimum of 51 poor peasants have been killed by the police and by the land-lords.

A fairly large proportion of these murders have been committed by landlord armies: the infamous Bramharshi Sena of the Bhumihars, the Kuwar Sena of the Rajputs, the Bhoomi Sena of the Kurmis and the Lorik Sena of the Yadvas. A recent addition

to the list is a Rajput organised Sena in Palamau district. These senas (1) Member of Parliament, Mahender Singh (King Mahender) was the brain behind Bhoomi Sena. Vijay Singh, a local Congress (I) leader, and the brother of the Governor of Assam, is the leader of the Sena in Palamau.

It is interesting that in the government's perception these senas never became a large enough threat to be controlled by special deployment of forces. But the terror they struck in the rural country side was immense. Since January 1980, our figures show at least 225 people have been killed by these landlord senas in Bihar.

It is only when the threat of these landlord armies began to decline before strong resistance by peasant organisation. Police camps were now being set up all over the district. In 1985 a combing operation called Operation Task Force was started. This operation involved large scale deployment of Bihar Military Police all over the district. Though this operation ended the same year, heightened police presence in Jehanabad became the norm. On April 1, 1986 the Arwal massacre took place. Soon afterwards Jehanabad was upgraded from being a sub-division of Gaya district, to a full-fledged district. With the growing number of massacres, and the widespread news coverage they were getting, it became necessary to take another initiative. Report after report (including government reports) pointed to the desperate living conditions of the rural poor. Thus with much fanfare *Operation Siddharth* was started. Both the operations i.e. Siddharth and Rakshak, currently in force in the district, have been worked out in close co-ordination with the central government. According to press reports, the Union Minister had gone to Patna and later senior police officials had come to Delhi and in a series of meetings the details of these operations were worked out.

The PUDR team visited Jehanabad to make an independent study of the recent reports of violence in that district. It was necessary for the team to keep the background of this area in mind,

as well as the immediate foreground viz., the heightened police and security personnel in Jehanabad. We visited 4 villages in Jehanabad where recent incidents of people being killed, beaten or arrested by the police have taken place. They are Penthith village, Bajitpur village and Azadbigha village under Karpi police station and Bhadasi village under Arwal police Station.

PENTHITH

On November 15, 1988, the persons, two of them members of of the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS), were killed in police firing during Chhat Mela near Penthith village.

Penthith borders on the river Punpun. A small distance away from the village are two temples, one fairly old and the other built recently. This place is well known for its five annual fairs (melas) held during Kartik, and Chaitra, *Makar-Sankranti*. As all fairs and hatts (village markets) in Bihar are auctioned out by the district administration, the organisation of these fairs too was auctioned to the highest bidder. The contract for organising these five fairs has been regularly going to Braj Mohan Sharma from the adjacent Kuntha block. It is claimed by the people that he enjoys administrative patronage. For several years the BPKS has been agitating for taking the contract away from Braj Mohan Sharma. They allege that the tolls he collects from the stall are exorbitant and that his musclemen extort money from the stall owners. Gambling pools and liquor stalls flourish during these melas and often women visitors are molested. The local people demanded that the contract for the fairs be given to a committee formed from among people of the nearby villages. To provide some security to visitors to the mela, the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha and the Indian People's Front has been setting up an assistance *shivar* (camp) in each of these melas since 1984. This camp had become a regular feature of the fairs. Last year, as usual, the assistance camp was set up on the morning of November 15. The same day some officials and policemen visited the fair. A heated altercation took place between the BPKS activists and the officials, which included the circle officer, regarding

the harassment of the visitors to the mela by Sharma's henchmen. Reportedly the circle officers agreed that the contract should not, if possible, be given to Sharma in the future and gave assurance that the administration would see to it that the harassment of people would not take place. The next day a police camp was set up at the mela. While the BPKS set up its camp on a raised platform, about 7 feet from the ground, on which the old Shiv Mandir was built, the police camped directly below the BPKS camp on the ground. All was seemingly well though there was some tension in the air. But suddenly late in the night a small explosive device went off next to the police camp. At the time when the explosion went off a large number of people were watching a cultural programme, while some BPKS volunteers had dropped off to sleep in their camp on the temple platform. According to the police, a bomb was thrown from the BPKS camp at the police. The police claim that the sentry on duty raised the alarm and the constables got up, ran a few feet forward, took position and fired at the people in the camp. The police point out that since the 'bomb' hit the side of the 7 feet high terrace it must have been thrown from above. According to BPKS supporters and eye-witnesses somebody had deliberately set off a powerful fire cracker. They do not know who set it off nor from where it was thrown. One explanation given to us was that the police themselves had set it off in order to create an excuse for their action. Another explanation was that contractor Sharma had thrown it to create a panic and implicate the BPKS. At any rate the firing left three dead. Satandev Choudhary (45), Secretary of the Jal Shramik Sangh, and a member of the district committee of the BPKS, was shot dead immediately. He was sleeping on the edge of the terrace, just above the police camp, and had been woken up that very instant by his brother who was another activist. Nand Yadav, a youth of 16-18 years of age, on a 'Chhat' fast was also shot dead. He was apparently not connected with BPKS. Sabaldeo Yadav (25), who was sleeping nearest to Satandev Choudhary also died that night. He was first shot in the leg, then as he ran towards the mandir for shelter he was shot again, and this time shot dead. Rajendra Yadav, secretary of the village

BPKS committee, and Ramesh Choudhary, a 23-year old boy, were injured. Two people were arrested, who according to BPKS activists, were bangle sellers

The official version contends that the intention of the BPKS was to scare the police in order to seize their arms. This account lacks credibility. First, there were no injuries to the police. Clearly the 'bomb' was a fairly innocuous fire cracker. This the police too admitted to us. Secondly, during the time that the police took to take up position, there was no attempt to attack them or to snatch their rifles. Thirdly, the trajectory, the police themselves claim, the 'bomb' took, makes no sense if someone 7 feet above them were to throw the 'bomb' vertically downwards. How can such a bomb ricochet off the platform wall? One of the possibilities, an administration official hinted at was that the police panicked. Even if the police did panic, they did not fire blindly. They had been conditioned to react in a certain way. They aimed deliberately at the raised platform above their camp, and in particular at the BPKS camp. It should be noted that there must have been about a hundred people on this terrace, including women and children. IPF activists say that when the policemen saw who had died, they were overheard saying that the main person got away. The bodies of the three persons who died were not handed back to the relatives but were cremated by the police. According to the District Magistrate this was done since no one came to claim their bodies. However the team chanced upon a copy of an order made by the District Magistrate directing that the bodies should not be handed over and that they be cremated quickly by the police after a speedy post mortem.

This incident at Penthith points to the impunity with which the police violates all norms of legality, the utter callousness and disregard for the right to life and security, and the administration-contractor nexus. An officer of the district whom the team interviewed confided that there was pressure from the higher up to second the police version of events.

BHADASI

Bhadasi is a large village with 150 households. It lies about a kilometer off the main road connecting Imamganj to Telpa. There used to be a *kachcha* road connecting the village to the main road, but this has recently been metalled after the police action.

Most of the landless labourers in this village are Paswans, Kahars, or Rajmars. Yadavs and Muslims are the land owners in the village but they are middle sized land owners with holdings ranging from 2 1/2 bighas to 15 bighas. About two years ago the minimum wages used to be 3 *seers kachchi* of paddy (approximately equivalent to a little over 1 kg rice) and no meals were given. After the agricultural labourers organised under the BPKS and went on strikes the wages were raised bit by bit to 3 kilos rice with *nashta* (snacks). This is the situation there today. The other severe problem villagers used to face earlier was the molestation and harassment of their womenfolk, especially by the Yadav landowners. This is not to mention the dacoit menace in that area. All this has almost completely ceased due to the movement launched by BPKS. This village has organisations of both the BPKS and the MKSS. Most of the agricultural workers are in either of the two organisations. Though the BPKS appears to be relatively stronger here.

On November 27, 1988, a group of about 24 armed policemen of the BMP, led by Daroga Imam Rashid, entered the home of Vakil Ram on a tip off that an armed squad was staying there. According to the police, when they entered the house from the rear entrance, the members of the squad opened fire on them killing the Daroga on the spot. In the exchange of fire that followed three members of the squad were killed while the others managed to escape over a wall. The police recovered several fire arms and extremist literature from the spot. Later a house to house search was conducted in the village and several people were arrested.

The version the local people gave us was different. According to them, five people described as '*sathis*' (comrades), were staying

in Vakil Ram's house. At the time of the incident, only an old woman, Lakhpati Devi was in the house with them. Three of the people were eating in the *angan* (courtyard) while two others were bathing at the small well in front. All of a sudden a door leading outside from a back room was forced open and the Daroga rushed in followed by some policemen. The people got up and ran to the front room and tried to open the door, but found more policemen outside. They shut the door and one of them picked up a hand gun. When the policemen entered and fired at them, this person fired back, killing the Daroga on the spot. This person also sustained fatal injuries. Meanwhile, two of these five people had managed to escape by climbing over a wall and running away. According to the people, the two persons left inside did not die in the exchange of fire. They were caught by the police and shot afterwards. But we have no way of ascertaining that.

After this incident, later in the day, more policemen accompanied by BSF jawans came and surrounded the village. They then went on a rampage beating up whoever they saw, including women and children. They ransacked house of the agricultural labourers and destroyed their meagre household goods. Houses of better off sections too were raided for money or consumer items. Villagers allege that jewellery was stolen from their women, and Rs. 5,000 was allegedly stolen from the home of Madan, a BMP jawan who had come home on leave. His son too was beaten up. According to Jamil Mian, a relatively well off resident, he was called by the police and beaten up too. The village bahia's shop was broken into and money and goods stolen. The team met some women who were forced to take off the traditional silver ornaments and anklets by the police. We also saw huts in which doors had been broken, mud walls and *chulhas* (cooking hearth) smashed.

While in the absence of eye witnesses it is difficult to decide the course of events of the actual killing, a few facts stand out clearly. The people visiting Vakil Ram's house had definitely some arms with which atleast one of them fired back at the police. The police broke into the house without warning and no attempt was

made to ask those inside to surrender. Since no actual breach of peace had taken place, the police had no basis to enter and start firing either. It is not possible with available information to ascertain whether all the three persons killed died during the exchange of fire. As mentioned above, villagers, including people not sympathetic to the peasant organisation, believe firmly that the two 'sathis' were killed later in cold blood by the police. According to Jamil Mian, as the three bodies were lying in a row before they were removed by the police, they must have been shot after they were captured. This is not wholly convincing. What however is absolutely clear is the rampage and looting the police indulged in after the firing. The police also arrested several people who are still in Jail. They include Vakil Ram, the owner of the house, Shanti Devi, his wife, and their two children, aged 3 and 5 respectively. When we asked officials why such small children are in jail, we were told that the mother refused to leave them behind. This speaks volumes for the trauma that Shanti Devi has undergone.

BAJITPUR

Bajitpur is about 10 kilometres from Bhadasi and quite far from the main road. The outlying *tolas* (settlements) of the Harijan and Muslim agricultural labour are however only about 1 km off the main road. There is a large stretch of open land between these *tolas* and the main road. This land is wasteland. It is not cultivated. On one small part of it a weekly *hat* (market) is held.

All the landowners of this village are Muslims. There are about five Muslim families with very large holdings. Mohiddin Khan cultivates 40 bigas of land, Ahmadi Mian cultivates 60 bighas, Halim Khan cultivates 50 bighas, and Rashid Khan cultivates 25 bighas. The agricultural labourers are either Muslims or Musaharas. They are about 40 Muslim houses of which around 30 families are agricultural labourers and others are artisans.

The large 90 bigha stretch of wasteland is called '*gair mazarua*' land (government land). We were shown a map of a 1912-13

settlement report which showed a plot of 22 acres (Khata No. 148, Plot No. 446) as *gair-mazarua* land. The adjoining plots were also *gair mazarua* according to the villagers. At the time of the 1971 settlement report the landlords 'produced' documents and had the plots transferred to their names.

In January this year, the landless labourers decided to take over this land. On January 12 they organised under the Mazdur Kisan Mukti Morcha and erected a red flag on the land and built huts around them. Around 30 huts were put up for 2 Muslim agricultural labour families, 15 Paswan families, 5 musahar families and for about 8-10 other dalit agricultural labour families. The next day the police came and smashed all the huts. The people then went and met the LRDC. On January 20 a meeting was fixed in office of the LRDC where both parties were called. According to the agricultural labourers, when the LRDC saw the papers the landlords presented he said they were fake and wrote so on the papers. Another meeting was fixed on January 23 but the labourers were not allowed inside the office and only the landlord was given a hearing. The labourers were sent back after being told that the LRDC would come himself to the area to see the spot. On January 30, the local people decided that they had waited long enough and again erected huts on the disputed land. The next day the huts were smashed again by a police force. The policemen beat up several women quite badly and smashed up utensils. The team was shown smashed cooking pots, pails and other utensils. Goods worth around Rs. 1,500 were destroyed by the police. On February 2, these agricultural labourers took all the utensil to the D.M. On the 5th the police came again and threatened the villagers not to tell anyone about what had happened. The officials have nothing to say about these incidents except that they have acted legally. To add a touch of irony to the situation, a little distance away were four brick houses neatly printed in cream, which the administration had built to house Harijans in on a small part of the *gair mazarua* land adjoining the road.

AZAD BIGHA

We visited Basata ka *tola*, the dalit *tola* (settlement) of Azad gha village from where Amarjeet Singh Sohi, the cultural activist from Punjab was arrested on November 14, 1988. There are around 82 households in this *tola*, all of whom are landless. Twenty two houses are of Rajmars, 45 households of Manjhis, 12 Paswans, 1 Dhobi and 2 Nais. All these families are landless agricultural labourers for the surrounding large landowners. The two largest landowners are Balu Prasad Singh of the main village, who owns about 80 bighas, and the Mahant of the Deokund Matt who owns about 250 bighas.

Deokund Matt is nearby religious place. The land legally belongs to the Matt, but is in the possession of the Mahant and most of it is cultivated by tenants. There about 250 bataidars on this land. The remainder is cultivated directly by the Mahant who employs 5-6 Banihars and also casual labour from nearby villages. The village itself is Rajput dominated. It is the home of around 40 Rajput families, all of whom own land.

Agricultural wages in this village used to be 2½ seer dhan kachchi (1350 gms of paddy, equivalent to less than a kilo of rice) with no meals for casual labour and 2 seer dhan kachchi for the Banihars employed under *halwaha-charwaha* systems comprises about 80% of the agricultural labour in this village. The interesting feature about them is that they are also given a small plot of land, usually 10 *kathas* for self-cultivation. Last year, however the agriculture, labourers organised under the Mazdur Kisan Mukti Manch and went on a 10-day strike during the harvest season. Their wages were then raised to 3 kgs. of rice with a meal for casual labour (though women labourers are still not given a meal) and 3 kgs. of rice along with the 10 *kathas* of land for the banihars. According to the agricultural labourers we interviewed, on the night of November 13 and 14 about 40 activists and sympathisers of the Mukti Manch had gathered in this village. They were chalking out a plan to demonstratively seize land of the Mahant of Deokunt.

Earlier, a large number of agricultural labour had gone and planted a red flag on the 85 bighas owned and operated by the Mahant. The flag was however pulled down by the Mahant's men. The peasant organisation had also made representations to the administration asking them to distribute the excess land, but to no avail. The meeting ended at about 2.30 p.m. Most of the people went back to their own villages, but a few stayed on to sleep for the night.

At about 3 p.m. the police came to the village. The village was surrounded and the police first raided the hut in which the meeting had taken place. There they found Amarjeet Sohi, and a few others, all fast asleep. They were all promptly arrested. In the early hours of the morning fresh police reinforcements arrived including a large number of BSF jawans. The policemen then raided every house in the *tola* and arrested every male they could find. Since by that time, most of the men had run away, the police could arrest only about 20 of them. All in all 25 people were arrested including Amarjeet Sohi. Twenty belonged to this village and four belonged to nearby villages. The villagers also alleged that the police took away small sums of money found in the huts.

Amarjeet Sohi has been charged with sedition under the arms act and under the terrorist act. The police have said that he is a Canadian terrorist who had 'infiltrated' into the country to provide training to Naxalite in Bihar. In actual fact, the 26 year old Amarjeet Singh Sohi hails from Sangrur district in Punjab. A few years ago he had gone to Canada to join his elder brother who is a resident there. Amarjeet Sohi became active in the Punjabi Sahitya Sabha, a cultural organisation very critical of the Khalistani terrorists in Punjab and of their supporters in Canada. Both Amarjeet Sohi and his brother had been threatened by them in the past. This organisation has contacts with Gursharan Singh and the Amritsar School of Drama directed by him. Thus when Sohi came to India for a visit he became active in this drama troupe. He also became involved with the revolutionary centre in Punjab and the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights (AFDR). When he learnt that some members of the Revolutionary Centre

were going to Bihar to attend the inaugural meeting of the Lok Sangram Morcha in Dalmia Nagar, Rohtas District, he decided to accompany them. He then decided to stay on in order to study the peasant movement for himself. Shortly before he was captured in Azadbigha he was to go back to Punjab.

After this incident several officers began to visit the village. Operation Siddharth, of which the villagers had not heard of before, also started fitfully. Four buffaloes were given to some households (for which they had to pay a bribe of Rs 200 each). Two households got a rickshaw each. Soon brick houses were being constructed for the agricultural labourers. There were about half a dozen such houses under construction. The villages demonstrated the strength of the construction by pushing a half-built wall. The wall collapsed easily. The team saw that no cement had been used between the bricks but some cement was rubbed on the outside to give the houses a cemented appearance. The administration is reportedly paying contractors Rs. 22,000 for each house. The team was told jokingly by some agricultural labourers : "So far we have been killed by the landlords, by the senas, and by the police. Now it is time for the roof to fall down upon us and crush us to death."

The treatment meted out to Amarjeet Sohi after his arrest is also reprehensible. We were told by reliable sources that he was beaten up and tortured. According to one description, Mr. R.R. Prasad (DIG) CID, who was among the senior officials who had come to interrogate Sohi, personally tortured him. According to this information, Sohi was bunched up on the ground. His hands and feet were tied and the DIG was kicking him and beating him and swearing abuses at him. So far the police has found no information against Sohi. The only thing they have is a photograph which they claim shows an armed squad. They have also recovered some pamphlets from his possession along with other 'extremist' literature such as Bhishm Sahni's "Tamas", and Avtar Singh Paash's poetry. They are therefore keen that he be booked under the NSA so that his case does not come up in court.

Mr. Sohi was an unusual catch. A Punjabi and a Sikh at that earning his living in Canada is not likely to be found in a remote Bihar village. The police needless to say were delighted at what came up in their dragnet. Ever since then the police officers, intent on forwarding their careers, painted Mr. Sohi first in Khalistani colours and then in bright red. Mr. Sohi and the others carried no arms with them, nor was there a shoot out when they were arrested. This in no way restrained the police from cooking up a fanciful story in which the helpless Mr. Sohi was violent and dangerous figure. According to our source Mr. Sohi was taking DIG R.R. Prasad's punishment unflinchingly almost resignedly. Mr. Prasad too will find it difficult to deny that it was the DM of Jehanabad who ultimately came to Mr. Sohi's relief. Mr. Prasad was not allowed to continue with his brutal methods and according to one eye witness, Mr. Prasad protested loudly. We also have it first hand from the Secretary, Home Department, in Patna on February 6, 1988 that the government was certain that Mr. Sohi was either a Khalistani or an agent of the dreaded left wing organisation IPANA, in Canada. But only a few "hours" earlier the then DM of Jehanabad said there was just no proof to believe that Mr. Sohi was a Khalistani nor that IPANA was really a dreaded organisation promoting Naxalism in India. It is most interesting to note in this connection that the DM of Jehanabad who refused to let Mr. Prasad, DIG (CID) of police, to torture Mr. Sohi, was transferred early in February 1989. To the best of the knowledge the DM's transfer was a punishment because she did not buckle under the pressure being put on her by the Secretary (Home) of the government of Bihar to book Mr. Sohi under NSA. The DM insisted that Mr. Sohi be charged with the same offence as the other 23 who were arrested with him have been charged.

JEHANABAD : BACKGROUND OF THE DISTRICT

The incidents investigated need to be analysed in the context of the background of the district and the peasant movement in that region. Jehanabad is the newest district of Bihar—created in 1986 after the Arwal massacre. Jehanabad had a population of 9.4 lakhs

in 1981, spread over an area of 1532.5 square kilometers. Eighteen per cent of its population is comprised of scheduled castes. The district is predominantly rural and 39.7% of its working population are classified as agricultural labourers and 47.4% are classified as cultivators. Literacy rate is comparatively high in this district—34% in 1981, compared to the state average of 26%.

While the census records 77% of the cultivable area under irrigation the area under assured supply of water is much less. Forty two per cent of the cultivable area is irrigated by canals, tubewells, and pumpsets. The other major sources are tanks, rivers and the indigenous systems of reservoirs and canals called *pynes*. All the blocks in this district are IRDP blocks. Schemes under the IRDP, NREP, RLEG are also supposed to be implemented. In fact, Jehanabad has the highest subsidy per capita (Rs. 2004) among all central Bihar districts under IRDP. Though power supply is irregular, more than 65% of the 870 villages in the district are electrified.

The large feudal estates of Jehanabad, such as the Tekari estate, were dismantled after the Zamindari abolition. In their place came up several rich landowners and middle peasants. Some of the rich landowners were scions of feudal overlords, others were former officials of these feudal estates. They belonged primarily to the Rajput and Bhumihar castes. The rich and middle peasants who were in the main ex-tenants of former zamindars, gained ownership rights after zamindari abolition. In this process sections of the castes of Kurmis and Yadavas gained ascendancy and a relative decline in some areas may have taken place of the traditionally dominant castes of Rajputs and Bhumihars.

The breakdown of the earlier feudal estates did not bring to an end the social mores and values that were prevalent during the zamindari period. The social oppression that had accompanied feudal oppression continued unabated in Bihar. In particular, social and sexual exploitation of dalit women, caste taboos against manual labour on land, and the extensive intolerance towards the

poorer classes and castes have remained to characterise Bihar, even 40 years after independence.

Another special feature of the plains of central Bihar were its dacoit gangs. Though they come mainly from what are called the backward castes, the members of these dacoit gangs seem to have close links with upper caste landowners. The origin of these gangs is not clear. One view is that they were made up of those musclemen (*lathaith*) of former zamindars who found themselves unemployed after the zamindari abolition. Another view we encountered considers this as part of the system of social and economic oppression in the central Bihar region. According to this view, a major part of economic exploitation in this region was the forcible extraction of surplus products over bare survival needs from the poor and middle peasants by gangs of dacoits. This is further strengthened by the prevalent social mores, in which aggression and oppression of the economically and socially weak is a source of power. In any case, dacoity has been one of the major problems in this district. Dacoits often struck terror in the hearts of even richer peasants of all castes. Womenfolk were raped, cash and valuables looted, pumpsets stolen, and cattle driven away. The arrest of cultural activist of IPF Virendra Vidrohi also highlights this. On August 11, 1988 eleven Dalits were killed by a dacoit gang in Damoha - Khagri village of the district for daring to oppose illicit distillery operated by them. Two months before that on June 16, 1988 at Nonthi-Nagma village 18 dalits had been killed and women molested by dacoits. When the then CM of Bihar Bhagawat Jha Azad visited Damohakhagari village on August 13, 1988 memories of Nonhi-Nagma killings were still fresh and people justifiably agitated by the inability of the administration to protect them and punish the guilty. It was as a sign of protest that Virendra Vidrohi smeared the face of CM with black ink. Vidrohi was arrested, tortured and charged under Indian Penal Code Sec. 124-A, (Sedition) and 307 (Attempt to murder).

These dacoit groups, government officials told us, were patronised by political parties since they helped them capture

booths during elections. The landlord armies (or *senas*) which cropped up from around 1980, were yet another crypto-formalisation of the landlord-criminal combine. The names of these *senas*, as already mentioned, have now become famous : the Bramharshi Sena, the Kunwar Sena, the Bhoomi Sena and the Lorik Sena.

Very soon many of these *senas* became a burden on the smaller and middle peasants. The members of the *senas* would demand liquor in large quantities and the best food to go with it. All this was over and above the payment they demanded for their services and for their ammunition. To finance their stay a cess was levied on all kisans. Soon the members of the *senas* turned their attentions on the Kurmi womenfolk (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 August 1986, p. 814). Under the relentless pressure from the IPF and MKSS the Bhoomi Sena disbanded in 1985. Ever since then the police stepped in to fill the void.

In post-independence India, the socialists and the J.P. led Chhatra Yuvak Sangharsh Vahini were active in Bihar. But the hopes that they had aroused were crushed very soon. Jang Bahadur Singh's political life is illustrative of this situation. Jang Bahadur Singh is now in his fifties. He is a rich Kurmi peasant who began his political career with the socialist party. After years of activism he realised that very little was happening because the legal machinery could be easily held up, thwarted and slowed down to near immobility. Consequently there was no relief for the poor and instead the exactions against them increased. Land hunger is so acute in Bihar that for a mere 25 decimals of land the Arwal massacre took place.

To return to our story, Jang Bahadur Singh was frustrated by the inaction on reforms and by the style of socialist party activism and switched loyalty to the MKSS. He found the latter organisation to be dedicated to bringing relief to the peasants for it forwarded the cause of the poorest peasants without succumbing to the rich peasant/big landlord pressure. The Chhatra Yuvak Sangharsh Vahini of J.P. too threw up a large number of disaffected

people who either joined the MKSS or the IPF, and through them their many front organisations. Some of the important functionaries of these organisations were active in the 1970's in the JP led movement but left it soon after when they were disenchanted with the Janta Party experience. According to an official of Bihar government, and a close observer of the current problem of Jehanabad, JP's view of Total Revolution was full of so many contradictions that no sustained logic could bind the various elements of his ideological and programmatic structure together. These lacunae soon became clear to a very large number of genuinely motivated individuals who gradually began to move towards the CPI (ML).

During our trip to Patna and Jehanabad all the officials we met from the Home Secretary, to the DM and SP in Jehanabad, admitted that it was because of the activities of the IPF and MKSS that the position of the poor peasants has shown some improvement over the last three years. As one senior official said : "You don't have to ask me who is responsible for the fact that there has been awakening among the poor peasants here. Every one known it, you know it too. Of course it is the MKSS and the IPF."

The peasant movement in the Central Bihar Plains arose out of this social reality. The basic demands around which agricultural labourers and poor peasants were at first mobilised were non-payment of minimum wages, occupation of *gair mazarua khas* and *gair-mazarua aam* lands, against dacoity and organised crime, and against social exploitation of dalits. On all of these issues, the movement has registered significant advances. A comparison of the facts of this fact finding team with the facts of our earlier fact finding teams on central Bihar confirms this. In 1981 our team visited various blocks in Patna district and noted that agricultural wages actually paid ranged from Rs. 2.25 per day in Maubatpur block to Rs. 2.33 in Masaurhi block per day (excluding meals). Our fact finding in February 1983 which visited Sikama and other villages in Jehanabad district noted that at that time wages were only 2 seer *kachchi* of paddy, equivalent to 1.28 kg. of paddy, which works out to less than one kg. of rice. Our next fact finding

team which went a few months later noted the increase in agricultural wages paid to $1\frac{1}{2}$ kilos of rice and $\frac{1}{2}$ kg. of *sattu*. (*Sattu* is ground roasted pulses which is mixed with water and eaten. Often *khesadi* is used. Sustained consumption of *khesadi sattu* can produce deformities.)

In the present fact finding trip we found that in all the four villages that we visited the agricultural wages paid were uniformly 3 kilos of rice with a meal per day. In all of these villages, the agricultural wages had gone up after agitations by agricultural labourers. Prior to these agitation wages were only of 1.2 kgs. of paddy (approx. 800 gms. of rice) per day, normally without a meal. It should, however, be noted that even the enhanced wages of today fall short of the stipulated minimum wage in the district, which is Rs. 15.45 and *nashta* (breakfast) per day. Similarly, in each village, we were told that organised crime has come down. In Bhadasi, for instance, there has been no forcible harvesting or thefts of cattle and pumpsets for well over a year. It is noteworthy that a major theft occurred recently in this village after a very long time. It took place soon after the police action we reported about earlier.

As far as the lessening of the social exploitation of the poorer classes and castes and the sexual exploitation of women go, even the administration was all praise for the peasant movement. The S.P. of Jehanabad district told us that "in this area no one has the guts to touch a woman, thanks to MKSS and IPF work". (On April 1, 1989, Six tribal women were gang raped in Jehanabad. They had come from adjoining districts to work in a brick kiln in Jehanabad district). The District Magistrate told us that in the 8 years that she has been in Bihar she had always to tell the people what their rights were. Here in Jehanabad there is no need to do that : it had already been done. "The demands of the people are being met because of pressure from below", she told the team, "not always due to the government".

That a senior police officer should admit what the peasant movement has achieved is a welcome change from our earlier

experiences in Bihar. But this has not meant any fundamental difference in the methods employed to tackle the problem. Crushing the peasant movement by use of the police and now the paramilitary forces, is still the main item on the agenda of the government. While a development project, Operation Siddharth, has been launched, it does not seem to have made much headway. In fact, we were told by a senior district official that Rs. 27 lakhs, meant for development activities had to be diverted over the past year for the upkeep of the police and para-military personnel in Jehanabad district alone. "These police personnel want better tents, better equipments, and even better TV sets", according to this official. This official also described Operation Siddharth as the carrot to supplement the stick of Operation Rakshak. Even the Central Team sent by the government noted that "whereas an impressive increase in the strength of police power and mobility has been provided, there is hardly any improvement in the personnel and equipmemen in the land revenue and developn ent side". The same team also felt that "considerable action" taken by the state government to increase police strength in the 'affected areas' "does not seem to provide much assurance that it helps bolster up the position of the weak to resist their exploitation and oppression. Rather the focus seems to be on trying to control the activities of the movement, and if possible to eliminate it altogether". The fact finding into the four incidents above clearly demonstrate that the police and the district administration, whatever their public postures, are clearly ranged against the poor and on the side of their oppressors and exploiters. The unjustified killing of three people in Penthith, all of whom were sympathisers or activists of the BPKS; the unprovoked attack on activists belonging to a CPI (ML) group in Bhadasi and the subsequent looting and beating by the police in that village; the beating up and eviction of agricultural labourers of Bajitpur; and finally the mass arrests in Azadbigha all go to show that the repression stick of Operation Rakshak will continue to fall heavily on the poor peasants.

It is in this context that one must evaluate the recent Operation Siddharth. The government claims to have distributed 23,583

acres of surplus land to 32,055 persons by mid-1988 alone. The government launched a survey to identify government land in 7 districts of central Bihar to "remove unauthorised occupation and regularise occupation by landless poor". As much as 88,873 acres of government land have been identified by the authorities and this has reportedly been redistributed to 122,109 beneficiaries. The Bhoodan Yagna Committee which has distributed 55 acres of land in 1987-88 has said that in Bhojpur and Rohtas districts alone more than 1 lakh acres of surplus land are available for distribution.

While it is difficult to assess the government claims about distribution of surplus and *gair mazarua* land the experience of the peasants of Bajitpur and Azadbiga, as reported by us, undermine the credibility of these claims. And yet, it is by no means the case that only central Bihar is afflicted by social and economic inequalities. That the state has woken up to their presence must be attributed to the peasants movement in this area. This has also affected the manner of implementation of Operation Siddharth in this region. Thus, while roads are to be built in this area as part of the Operation (in 1981 less than 17% of the villages had *pucca* approach roads), the only roads that we saw that were being laid were in areas where there had been a police action. Two days after the incident at Bhadasi a road was built in record time linking the village to the main. Soon after the raid in Azad biga, the road to the village is being re-laid from Telpa onwards. In fact the rumour goes that contractors too are very keen that an area be declared "extremist affected" so that government funds will be released for them to line their pockets with. The programme of building houses for dalit labourers, as part of Indira Awas scheme is being implemented in Azadbiga after the raid in the village.

In other matters too, the stories are similar. In Nadhwan village (Kantha block), for example, bataidars of a landlord were resiting his attempts to sell off the land they were tilling and thus effectively evicting them from these lands. In 1983 they filed a case before the L.R.D.C. in Jehanabad. Despite the initial report going in their favour they were not given back their bataidari

rights. Instead, cases were foisted on them for forcible harvesting. They sent letters of appeal to the Bihar government and even to the Supreme Court. The supreme court asked the Legal Assistance Department of the Bihar Government to enquire into the case. However they still did not get their rights. It was only after the police and BSF made an attempt to break a public meeting on this issue in the village on 1 November 1988, which the villagers resisted very strongly, that the district administration decided to set up a bataidari board, under the provisions of the Bataidari Act, to enquire into their grievancees. When we left Jehanabad on February 6, 1989, the relevant order had yet to be passed.

From the above, it is clear that the description of Operation Siddharth as the carrot, and Operation Rakshak as the stick is apt. It is a gross perversion of the goals of development if the granting of constitutional rights to people is viewed primarily as an instrument to wean them away from "extremist influences". The government excuse for the deployment of forces on such a large scale does not appear plausible either. Our fact finding shows quite clearly that these forces are meant only to crush the peasant movement. One of the disturbing things the team noted was the widespread use of 'clashes' between the two major mass organisation as excuses for police deployment. The team found almost every single government or police officially attributing most of the rural violence to this. This has enabled the government to escape from a closer scrutiny of its own past deeds by public opinion in the state. It is definitely true that tensions between the two major mass organisations, the BPKS and the MKSS, have developed. In the light of the record of these organisations in raising the consciousness of the people as a whole such tensions are unfortunate, and may damage the movement. However, the extent of the tensions is being greatly exaggerated by the government in order to justify to the public the use of excessive armed forces.

The government also claims the use of arms by CPI(M-L) groups as one of the reasons for the strong police presence. It should be noted that they did not consider the ravages of the land

lord *senas* and the massacres they committed as worthy of such attention. In fact, the police even helped the Bhoomi *sena* in its operation, and the government has distributed arms to landlords quite freely in the past. In this context the views of the above mentioned Central Government team are worth recording. "Once the root cause of the recourse to violence by the traditionally weak and suppressed are recognised, it would be readily agreed that the solution to the problem does not lie in crushing their efforts for assertion of minimum dignity and aspiration as human beings, but in devising effective lawful instruments of delivering to the poor social and economic justice. In this view of the matter, excessive dependence on strong armed police methods of putting down 'violence' of the left wing extremists with a heavy hand restoring normalcy, cannot but be counter productive."

The team is of the view, therefore, that immediate step should be taken to;

1. Stop repression of activists and sympathisers of the peasant movement;
2. Withdraw the armed forces from central Bihar and instead use the funds thus released for development purposes;
3. Withdraw false cases against activists and sympathisers of the movements;
4. Unconditional release of Amarjeet Sohi and Virendra Vidrohi;
5. Criminal cases be instituted against well known dacoits and against those landlords and officials who have committed atrocities on the people.
6. Revoke the ban on MKSS.
7. Stop the use of TADA and other black laws.



ANNEXURES

I Extremist Affected Areas in Bihar according to Union Home Ministry and Bihar Government.

Number of Affected Blocks

<i>District</i>	<i>M.H.A.</i>	<i>Bihar Govt.</i>	<i>Name of Blocks</i>
1. Patna	6	6	Pali, Bikram, Dhanrua Punpun, Masaurhi, Naubat pur.
2. Nalanda	2	3	Chandi, Hilsa (Ekangar sarai).
3. Bhojpur	7	10	B r a m h p u r Nawanagar, Dumrao, Buxur, Sahar (Sandesh). Piro, (Udwantnagar), (Tarani) Jagdishpur.
4. Rohtas	3	7	Bilwanganj, Dawadh Dinara, (Mohaniya) (Ramgarh), (Nasaniganj), (Bhagwanpur)
5. Gaya	4	5	Arras, Guruwa, Shengati, Dumaria, (Emanganj)
6. Aurangabad	2	3	Madhanpur, Rafiganj, (Deo)
7. Jehanabad	3	7	Jehanabad, Ghoshi, Arwal, (Kako), (Karpi), (Kuntha), (Makhdunpur).
Total	<hr/> 27 <hr/>	<hr/> 41 <hr/>	

Note : Names in brackets are those blocks which the state government claims are "extremist affected", but not the Union Home Ministry.

II Additional Police Statement Jehanabad district

Official figures

Bihar Military Police	— 10 Companies
Central Reserve Police Force	— 1 Company
Border Security Force	— 2 Companies

Unofficial figures

Block	Number of police Camp	Estimated strength of additional forces
Jehanabad	15	1746
Kortha	8	98
Makdompur	2	22
Ghoshi	14	228
Kako	16	192
Kampi	13	204
Arwal	6	84
Total	74	2574

(Sources : Report of the Lok Sangram Morcha, 1988)

Jehanabad District : Socio - Economic Details :

II A. Name of Development Block				
	<i>Number of Villages</i>	<i>Population ('000)</i>	<i>% of Literates</i>	<i>% of Scheduled Castes</i>
1. Jehanabad	98	82.3	34.9	17.3
2. Makhdumpur	126	138.9	52.8	20.6
3. Kurtha	167	159.8	30.1	15.0
4. Karpi	109	137.6	28.8	17.9
5. Arwal	126	171.6	33.9	18.4
6. Kako	93	91.4	28.3	18.4
7. Ghoshi	151	157.5	30.7	17.4
Jehanabad Dist...	870	939.1	34	18
B. % of Irrigated area to cultivable area				
	<i>% of area Irrigated by Canals</i>	<i>% of area Irrigated by tube wells/pump set</i>	<i>% of electrified villages</i>	
1.	62.5	1	40.7	84.7
2.	61.3	13.1	38.5	65.9
3.	89.1	5	24.7	75.5
4.	77.7	29.7	22.5	61.5
5.	81.2	95.4	0.6	16.7
6.	85.7	1.4	36.8	90.3
7.	73.7	4.3	29.1	68.2
Jehanabad District	76.8	30	24	65

C. Occupation Classification

	% of main workers	% of cultivators	% of agricultural labourers
Jehanabad District	29	47.4	39.7
	Total Area	Population Density (per Sq. km.)	
Jehanabad District	1532.5km.	613	

Source : Census of India : 1981

Political Killings in Bihar : A compilation

1. January 1980 - June - 1983

Description of Attackers	Number Killed
Landlords or their men	108
Police	60(65)
Landlord and Police	5
Others	7
Unknown	5
Total	185 (190)

2. January 1984 - April 1986

Description of Attackers	Number Killed
Landlords or their men	72
Police	81
Landlords and Police	18
Others	2
Total	180

3. May 1986 - January 1988

Description of Attackers	Number Killed
Landlords or their men	84
Police	29
Total	113

PUDR has produced a number of booklets on Bihar. These are "Repression in Singhbhum" (1979, PUCL&DR), "Agrarian Unrest in Patna" (1981), "Saharjori—Abandoned Miners of Santhal Parganas" (1913), "Police Repression in Jehanabad" (1983 with APDR), "Jehanabad: Peasant Movement and Police Repression" (1983 with PUCL (Bihar)), "And Quiet Flows the Ganga" (1983) and "Behind the killings in Bihar (1986)"

Though a Delhi based organisation we have investigated and documented attacks on the democratic rights of the people all over the country. In addition to the reports mentioned above PUDR has taken up the issues of tribals and peasants in Telengana, Adilabad and Bastar, industrial workers of Faridabad and Modinagar, mine workers of Chattisgarh and Meghataburu, slum dwellers of Delhi, cultural workers of Kerala, Nagas of Manipur, minorities of Delhi, and Aligarh, academic freedom in Delhi and warangal and others. It has fought a number of legal cases in the Supreme court in relation to the rights of political prisoners, bonded labour, construction workers, tribals and atrocities committed by the police and army.

PUDR members are lawyers, journalists, teachers, students, and artists. It draws its finance from small donations as well as sale of its literature, and does not accept funds from political parties, the government, or foreign agencies.

PUDR appeals to all democratic sections to help in as many ways as they can especially with donations and the popularisation of its literature.