BHOJPUR

NAXALISM IN THE PLAINS OF BIHAR

KALYAN MUKHERJEE ■ RAJENDRA SINGH YADAV

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Kalyan Mukherjee
Rajendra Singh Yadav

RADHA KRISHNA

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Kalyan Mukherjee
Rajendra Singh Yadav

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This work is dedicated to all those who gave their lives in the search for human dignity and those who still remain fighting for izzat, *uncompromisingly.*

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Foreword

It was the second week of March 1977. Cramped and sticky in a rickety jeep, four of us—two journalists, the husband of Banarsi Devi Gupta, a local woman leader of agricultural labourers, and I—were headed for the village of Gurpa in the Sahar block of Bhojpur district in south Bihar. In the relentless heat and dust, the road was hardly visible.

Our guide told us that Bhojpur was particularly famine-prone, despite the impressive Sone Canal System. At one of the villages we asked the driver to stop for water. As soon as the jeep swung into Bawangawa, a group of children playing on its outskirts scattered shouting, "Police, police!" When we stepped out, none of the villagers came forward to meet us. It took considerable time to persuade them to believe that we were not the police, nor informers for that matter.

Bawangawa, a village in the block of Ara Mofussil, was not a 'Naxalite' one, our guide explained. But ever since a police raid, the people were diffident. The sight of a jeep brought fear. In the 'disturbed areas' of Bhojpur—the blocks of Sahar, Sandes, Tarari and Udwantnagar—however, the people were far from timid. They would not run at the sound of a jeep. On the way when we stopped at the village of Ekwari, Sahar block—the 'Naxalbari of Bhojpur'—the villagers were merely suspicious. The change was unmistakably clear. Subsequently, during one of our long discourses with a Bihar Military Police (BMP) regular, he observed, "In the Naxalite areas the last thing you can rely upon is the local people."

Around midnight we reached Gurpa. Outside, in the still silence, only the sound of crickets could be heard. A few days earlier, on 11 March, the village had become a furnace. In a brutal act of reprisal the *latheiths* of Dharam Pande, the most powerful Bhumihar landlord, had reduced Gurpa's Harijan quarters to ash and cinder. As soon as we had entered the

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village, the journalists began clicking their cameras, illuminating the darkness with bursts of flashlight. At the other corner of Gurpa the police camp had begun to get restive.

In fact, they had already started moving in our direction. The villagers kept saying that we must first go and meet them otherwise they might think that Naxalites had come to the village. A year ago, on 11 August 1976, a *dasta* of olive-green uniformed Naxalites, led by Sheila Chatterjee, had entered Gurpa at dusk and shot dead five Bhumihars. Since then the police were camping at the house of Tapeshwar Pande. All at once, came a loud command, "Halt!"

The boy who had escorted us to the centre of the village—the dividing line between the Bhumihars and Harijans of Gurpa—was nowhere to be seen. Startled and confused we were caught in the glare of police torches and pointed carbines. We raised our hands and one of us began to explain, "We are journalists." After the panic wore off and we settled down on a stringy *charpai*, the police officer, assured of our bona fides by now, became frank, "What can we do—we have to take precautions."

An uneasy peace prevailed in Gurpa, Bahuara, Sonatola, Ekwari, Dullamchak and countless other villages in the district which we visited later, as police personnel stuck to their guns. A bedraggled force, flabby at the knees, poorly paid and hard-pressed to cope. Some even admitted that it was a situation in which they were losing day after day. In fact, all they wanted was to get out of Bhojpur once and for all.

After I returned to the mofussil college at Chapra, North Bihar, where I was teaching English, memories of Gurpa remained. The first thing I did was to write down my impressions and *The Times of India* carried an account titled, "Bhojpur : A Tale of Terror". But the anguish lingered. Whenever I asked students and colleagues about the events in Bhojpur, they shook their heads vaguely. One of them, however, told me that a former student of the college had been one of its founding fathers: Jagdish Mahto. That was about all they knew of the district on the other side of the Ganges.

In early 1978 an offer came my way. The National Labour Institute, New Delhi, was exploring the possibilities of diagnosing the agrarian ferment in Bhojpur, and requested me to join

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the project as a research investigator. I agreed at once. Refused leave by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, I quit my post at Rajendra College, Chapra, and with three other research investigators spent the next three months travelling through the length and breadth of Bhojpur. At about this time I came in touch with Rajendra Singh Yadav, the 'Naxalite' lawyer of Ara, the district headquarters of Bhojpur.

In his black coat, the broad-shouldered Yadav appeared out of place in the mofussil court at Ara, teeming with petty munsifs and their clients. "They call me the 'Naxalite' lawyer because I am the only one who handles the cases of poor illiterate peasants in this district," Yadav explained, gulping tea in the small, dusty *dhaba* across the road. Over the years Yadav had become a name in many villages of the district, and had acquired detailed knowledge of the people and the incidents of violence. Yadav became our most valuable guide to the bloody agrarian scene of the district.

By the end of May when we completed the survey for the National Labour Institute, only the tip of the iceberg was visible. We had filled notebooks full of details but the one comment that kept rankling in our minds was the refrain, "Had we not been there, the Naxalite movement would never have taken place in this district." The speaker was a white-haired man we had encountered in the village of Lacchmipur in Ara Mofussil: Kesari Mahto. An old participant in the Triveni Sangh movement that shook the plains of Bhojpur in the thirties, Mahto spoke at length of the first awakening of the backward caste Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris. He lamented, "We had an organisation, our own songs, our own slogans, but we lost. Most of the leaders sold out to the upper-caste Congress. But the cause remained. The poor *banihars* remained. So did the *zulum*. Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir tried to complete the unfinished tasks of our movement. By violent means." It was later on, working on another project in the district, sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi, between September 1978 and January 1979 that the contours of tradition and change, conflict and continuity, and the road to a second awakening became clearer.

The movement in the district fell into two phases: the 1930s

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—Triveni Sangh; and the 1960s—Naxalite upheaval. At places the divide converged—primarily at the conjuncture of caste and class. The Socialist messiah Dr Rammanohar Lohia had outlined a theme in 1955 in his *Wheel of History*: "Class is mobile caste. Caste is immobile class. Every society or civilisation has known this movement from class to caste and vice versa. This movement is at the root of almost all internal happenings. It is almost always inspired by the demand for justice and equality but the initial demands have hitherto always been corrupted."

In Bihar in general, and in Bhojpur in particular, shades of lost causes remained. The long simmering ferment in the southwest district of Bhojpur took a dramatic turn. While the ferment in Musheiri in North Bihar died down with the arrest and deaths of prominent Naxalite leaders by early 1971, the action in Bhojpur was just beginning. Unknown names like Jagdish Mahto, Rameshwar Ahir, Butan Musahar, Dr Nirmal, began to find their way into the police files. None of them were or had been members of communist parties. But the struggle they unleashed was a continuation of the armed struggles in Naxalbari in North Bengal and Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, which had by this time died down.

Names and events began to crowd the canvas against which we had begun to write out the first rough draft of this book. That the people were struggling, was certain. Even the police admitted it. In presenting the movement we consciously kept out the slogans and for that matter the deadening prose of the local papers. By the time it was complete a lot of other events had taken place. Notably, the spread of the movement into the contiguous districts of Rohtas, Aurangabad, Gaya, Patna. . . Most of the old leaders were dead and new men had taken over. The account we have put together is fragmented in parts—often consciously, more often due to lack of details. The last thing we wanted to do was to impose a harmony on an everchanging scenario. A book is an unfinished script. After more than a decade of struggle, Bhojpur continues to simmer: the bane of the state but the hope of hundreds of poor peasants for whom Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir have become symbols of unflinching sacrifice in the cause of justice.

12 June 1980 KALYAN MUKHERJEE
New Delhi

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CHAPTER ONE

Five Decades on the Banks of the Sone

13 April 1977. When the DSP reached the village of Dhauri in Sahar, Bhojpur, Lakho had been murdered. The women, tense and silent, refused to speak at first. And then slowly, after the exhaustion wore thin, they began to narrate haltingly in Bhojpuri their tale of terror and tragedy.

Lakho's *bhabi*, Panpati Devi said: "At about seven p.m. we were squatting near the canal. We were sitting apart, Lakho remained standing. Then Vijaya came up from behind and stabbed her with a knife. Lakho groaned and yelled, '*Bhaoji*-oh-*Bhaoji*, Vijaya has stabbed me.' I began to run. Vijaya had fled by then." Fifteen-year-old Pauna, the wife of Ropan Chaudhury, who saw it happen before her eyes, added, ". . . he came from the west and flashed a torch, stabbed her and fled. Vijaya had covered his face with a *lungi* and had come close to her like *Kanahiya*. But we recognised him. . . ." Piyari, wife of Laldhari Chaudhary, confirmed their statements. Sumitra, 20, wife of Amirchand Chaudhary, another eye-witness, repeated the same story: ". . . Vijaya, Rambacha's son, came and flashed a torch and stabbed Lakho. After stabbing her he fled. Then she yelled. . . ."

Lakho's father, a landless Malaha[1] labourer, worked at the house of Bacha Narayan Singh, Vijaya's father. Since the last three days Vijaya had been pursuing her. On 13 April, he accosted her, according to Lakho's father, in the field, while she was looking after the cattle. She rejected his overtures, at which Vijaya threatened, "If you do not agree, you will not live to see the end of this day." And so Lakho died.

[1]Malahas are a lower-caste section, traditionally boatmen.

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More than seven decades ago in *Shahabad*[2], an Ahir called Kesari Mahto "Master" was arguing with Rutherford, the District Collector. A Dusadh girl had been raped by the Rajput landlords of Dhammar village in Ara Mofussil, and he was seeking justice. Rutherford pleaded helplessness. Kesari Master, on the edge of impatience, snapped back, "Rutherford sahab, if you cannot do anything, what can we do? We have no police. We have no lawyers. We have no leaders. We have no jobs. What do we do?" For the backward castes of Shahabad there was no dignity and no hope.

Shahabad, a district in South Bihar, had come under the 1873 Permanent Revenue Settlement. The vices that Lord Hastings, twenty-six years after the promulgation of the Cornwallis Act, described were true of Shahabad also. Hastings in a minute of 31 December 1891 had bitterly observed, "It was worthy of the soul of Cornwallis, yet his truly benevolent purpose, fashioned with great care and deliberation, has to our painful knowledge, subjected almost the whole of the lower classes throughout these provinces to the most grievous oppression too, so guaranteed by our pledge that we are unable to relieve the sufferers."

The raiyats[3], mostly belonging to the backward castes, were seriously affected. The British who had set up the zamindars as intermediaries, apart from gentle pricks of conscience, as in the Hastings Declaration, remained apathetic to them. The revenue demand, as fixed by the 1873 act, of nine-tenths of the rent, was exacting. And what the zamindars declared as rent, did not include *abwabs*[4] and *salaami*[5]. The Maharajah of Dumraon in Shahabad extorted from his raiyats illegal cesses like ghee, curds and fuel at the time of funerals, marriages or festivals in the family. The raiyats had no option but to comply.

The woes of the raiyat in Shahabad, though comparatively less painful than those of his kind in the neighbouring districts

[2]This district in Southwest Bihar was bifurcated in the early 1970s into Bhojpur and Rohtas districts.

[3]Same as ryots, peasants.

[4]Illegal cesses exacted from the tenants.

[5]Premium paid when occupancy holdings were transferred.

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of Patna and Gaya, was further intensified by the produce-rent system.[6] It was based on debatable postulates; one such being the concept of benevolent patronage. Produce-rents were the normal mode of rent payment particularly in the subdivisions of Bhabua and Sasaram[7]. The regions in Shahabad which were produce-rent areas were to influence the agrarian movements that subsequently shook the district in the 1930s.

Whereas the tenant demand in southern Shahabad. Bhabua and Sasaram subdivisions expressed itself in a movement for commutation (conversion of produce-rent into cash-rent), the tenant in the Buxar and Ara Sadr subdivisions reacted differently. O'Malley recorded that the movement for commutation was influenced by the tenants' realisation of "the difficulties and disadvantages inherent in such a complicated system of recovery; the Sone Canal Irrigation system, which affords the raiyat a certain supply of water independent of the jamindar, had done much in this direction."[8]

Moreover, in the produce-rent areas the zamindar often remained indifferent to his obligations towards the raiyats. By law, produce-rent was realisable by the landlords on the fulfilment of certain responsibilities. The most important being that

[6]The system of produce-rent chiefly prevails in three districts of Bihar, namely, Shahabad, Patna and Gaya, and to some extent in the districts of Bhagalpur and Monghyr. Broadly there are two systems of payment of produce-rent prevalent in these districts: First, the *agorabatta* also called *batai*. There are various subdivisions of the *batai* system, namely *batai nansate*, *bàtai nisf* and *batai tikuli*. Under this system the landlords' share, unless otherwise agreed, is half of the produce. Secondly, *bhaoli* or *danabandi* – the crop is assessed before cutting and the landlords' share is paid in cash according to the appraisement and not the actual harvest. In North Bihar, *bhaoli* has been frequently used as equivalent to *batai nisf*. *Danabandi* means apportionment of crop. Its incidence is same as of *bhaoli*. (The Bihar Tenancy Act, Cv III of 1885, Ch. VIII, General Provisions as to Rent, p. 443).

[7]Its spread in Sasaram and Bhabua (25.73% to 28.44%), now known as Rohtas, made that region receptive to the kisan politics of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. On the other hand, the subdivisions of Buxar and Ara Sadr (now known as Bhojpur) witnessed anti-government agitations on the question of canal rates, both before and after independence.

[8]L.S.S. O'Malley: "Rents, Wages and Prices", *Shahabad Gazetteer*, (1924), p. 99.

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he "should provide capital for looking after a necessary water-supply."[9] In Shahabad, O'Malley recorded, "In practise, however, the landlord often evades his share of the responsibilities and the complicated method of appraisement and division naturally results in much speculation and mutual friction."[10] The inhuman extraction of surplus through *salaami*, *abwabs* and *begar* generated resentment and hatred against the zamindars.

The contrasts were too sharp: on the one hand the rich zamindars of Dumraon and Jagdishpur, and on the other the miserable raiyats. The backward-caste raiyat was growing more insecure because of the fears that the 1911 Census operations had generated. O'Malley wrote: "There was a general idea in Bengal [Bihar was then a part of Bengal] that the project of the census is not to show the number of persons belonging to each caste, but to fix the relative positions of different castes and to deal with questions of social superiority." Castes were classified in the previous Census Report in order of social precedence by Risely, the Census Commissioner of 1901.

The Risely woe that touched the raw nerve of 'inferiority' in the backward and scheduled castes dug deeper with the spectacle of the upper castes like the Bhumihars and Kayasthas jockeying for caste upliftment. Dr Sachidanand Sinha's caste credo was generously sustained by the organisers of Kayastha Pathshala, in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. The Bhumihars in Bihar rallied around Sir Ganesh Dutta Singh. Even Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, the latterday kisan leader, spent his early political career in a subsidised ashram at Bihta teaching the scions of Bhumihar landlords the virtues of *purohitai*. The backward-caste tenants in Shahabad were beginning to feel increasingly cornered, surrounded by upper-caste mobilisation. A tense insecurity gripped many of their local leaders.

However, for those living on its banks, the Sone canal eased misery to an extent. In order to compensate for the sunbroiled, waterless summers of Shahabad, the creation of the late Colonel C.H. Dickens proved of unusual service. Francis Buchanan, who travelled on horseback through the area in 1812-1813 observed: "The Son, though fordable in places for half the year,

[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*

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has always formed a dividing line between peoples racially or linguistically distinct. The area now comprised within the district of Shahabad formed part of the ancient Karusa desa, and was never regarded as included in Magadha. Crossing the Sone from Magadha, crowded with sites associated with the history of Buddhism, and teeming with archaelogical evidence of Buddhist influence, into Shahabad, one enters a country over the greater part of which there is scarcely a trace of Buddhist remains, amongst a people proverbially of a more turbulent nature, who not only speak a different dialect but even use different words for some common objects and plants."[11]

75 per cent of the Sone Canal System lay in Shahabad district.[12] The British hopes, as O'Malley ruefully recorded, did not easily materialise into lucrative optimism: "When the construction of the canals were in progress, sanguine hopes of the revenue they would yield were entertained, but the events proved the fallacy of these early forecasts. The receipts of tolls have equally failed to realise the expectations originally entertained. The result has been that for many years the Canal was unremunerative; and it is only during recent years (i.e. by 1921-22), almost 50 years after its completion that the return of the capital expenditure has exceeded six per cent."[13]

Though the coffers of the British were not exactly bursting with canal revenue, the people on the banks of the Sone were partially relieved. O'Malley noted: "The famine of 1873-74, the expected failure of the 'Kharif' rice crop owing to scanty rain and the total failure of rains in 1888-89 in fact, the prospects of serious famine were averted."[14]

But the operationality of the Sone Canal System proved to be a harassment for the British. They had set up an elaborate system of leases for irrigation and an infrastructure for the collection of water-rates—local bosses (*maaliks*) being an important cog in its execution. Water-rates were charged either flatly over the whole of the acreage which fell within the

[11]*Journal of Francis Buchanan kept during the Survey of the District of Shahabad, 1812-1813.*

[12]Bhojpur 68.8%, Rohtas 6.2%, Gaya 11% and Patna 14%.

[13]O'Malley, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 80.

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command area of an irrigation work, or on actual utilisation of canal water. Generally, the former method was used in which no discrimination was made between the actual beneficiaries and others (those who only marginally or never benefited).

An area of friction and deprivation thus always separated the revenue collector and the neglected raiyat; when the crash came with fall in the prices of foodgrains, the burden on the raiyat, who had to cope with the flat water-rates, was oppressive. The 30s in Shahabad promised to be gruelling. In Bihar there were only two political forces that could in any measure attend to it: the upper-caste Congress Party, led primarily by the Rajputs and Kayasthas, and the Kisan Sabha under the dynamic leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati.

*

At the centre of Shahabad's unrest was the tenant. Francis Buchanan recorded his misery during his travels across its stretches. Nawanagar, once inhabited by the scions of the Pramar family, lay decrepit: "Nawanagar is a very wretched small town. It belongs to a younger branch of the Pramar family which has consisted of five generations and has subdivided into three shares. Its wretched state seems to be owing to their inactivity. They do not manage their own affairs, but have farmed out their rents, and the *Tikadars* have neglected Ahars so that the whole crop almost has failed, the country being fitted for rice. The chief of the family, a wretched, dirty starved-looking creature, said that they had no strength to cultivate and that the wild cattle from the neighbouring woods eat everything up that was sown."[15]

The problem of tenants had been on the agenda of the Kisan Sabha since its very inception and resolutions had been mooted as early as the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS) conference at Jehanabad, 30-31 May 1931, and Sonepur, July 1931, against the *danabandi* system of produce-rent. Demands for rent receipts were reiterated by the Sabha. Dumraon estate in Buxar subdivision recorded commutation tension in 1924-25 and the question of *salaami* and *abwabs* grew acute in 1931-32, worsened,

[15]Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

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reaching its peak in 1940-41.

The District Congress Committee (DCC) in Shahabad was hard-pressed to cope with this problem. Prominent DCC members like Chandra Shekhar Prasad Singh of Chaugain, Babu Radhika Raman Prasad Singh of Surajpura, Babu Shatrunjay Prasad, Hargovinda Mishra and the Kulharias of Arrah belonged to zamindari background. In the provincial leadership no less a person than the Rajput Congress chief Anugraha Narayan Sinha recorded nostalgically in his autobiography *Mere Sansmaran*, his days as a lawyer of the Dumraon Raj, paying tribute to the Maharaja. By its sheer upper-caste, affluent character the leadership of the DCC and Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC) could only remotely, if at all, grasp the problem of the backward-caste tenant.

On the other hand, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati's growing disillusionment with the Congress made him bitter. His realisation, 'Politics is our means but our aim is bread', was to have its effect on the tenant question in Shahabad. But the character of the BPKS hamstrung its spread in the district. Even Walter Hauser, the Swami's charitable biographer, recognised its deep caste and class pulls:

"Socially the Kisan Sabha leadership was predominantly Bhumihar, and there were also Rajputs, Brahmins and Kayasthas, but in very small numbers: variation in the social composition of leadership appeared at the district level where locally prominent castes were found, with occasional Kurmis and Koeris. The Bhumihar dominance simply neglected the strength of that group as the major element among the 'landed gentry' and 'adventurers' in the period. In terms of class background, the kisan leaders were primarily from landholding families, in some areas of considerable means, more generally of moderate holdings, and in a few cases from small-holding families. Some of these leaders considered themselves to be tenants, but whether this suggests a complete absence of any personal holdings is not entirely clear."[16]

1936 marked the peak of feverish tenant hysteria in southern Shahabad. From early 1936, the indefatigable Swami along with

[16]Walter Hauser, *The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha: 1929-1942*, pp. 77-78.

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his trusted aide, Jadunandan Sharma, toured the district and at Jitaura organised a massive kisan conference on 29 January 1936, demanding, among other things, the reduction of rent. On the questions of tenant grievances BPKS demonstrations were organised at Ekwan on 27 and 28 March 1936. The spread of the BPKS in Shahabad had enough reason to alarm the Congress.

On the tenant question, the agrarian programme of the 49th Indian National Congress, held at Lucknow on 12-14 April 1935 and the manifesto of the BPKS adopted on 11 July 1936 had one rare, abiding consensus: proposed relief of the tenant from agricultural debt. The half-hearted attempts of the Congress to inquire into tenant grievances as early as 1931 catalogued a lot of woes: unfair appraisement, *abwabs*, non-granting of rent receipt and *salaami*. With 1936 gradually putting the tenant question in the forefront of provincial politics and an encroachment of the BPKS into the political profile of Bihar, the Congress revived its earlier strategy of containment.

In early 1936 the BPCC decided to set up a Kisan Enquiry Committee for Shahabad. Srikrishna Singh and K.B. Sahay visited Darihat, a village in the zamindari of Chaudhary Kalika Prasad Singh; Jitaura, a village in the fief of Babu Nirmal Kumar Jain; the villages of Atmi and Simri on the edge of the Buxar *diara* in Dumraon Raj, and Kudra in Bhabua subdivision and Dehri. All these villages were pockets of intense Kisan Sabha activity. No landlords of Shahabad attended the meetings of the Committee though several of their agents (*amlas*) watched the proceedings. One of the zamindars told the District Magistrate that the Raja Sahab of Surajpura and some other zamindars of that area were trying to enlist Congress sympathy. The magistrate quipped characteristically: "Still it is a pity that the zamindars cannot join together against a common enemy."[17]

The tenant question continued to rankle with the Congress if for nothing else, at least as a counter-check to the BPKS espousal of the tenant cause. The victory of the Congress in the 1937 elections and its failure to keep the promises made to the

[17]Letter from Magistrate of Shahabad to Commissioner of Patna, 10 July 1936.

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peasants subsequently led to its irreparable break with the BPKS in 1938. The Faizpur agrarian programme of the Congress in December 1936 which promised amelioration of tenant misery was belied by the insignificant efforts in that direction after the 1937 victory.

That they were not significantly benefited from the Bihar Tenancy Amendment Act (Act 8 of 1937) and the Bihar Restoration of Bakasht Lands and Reduction of Arrears of Rent Act (Act 9 of 1938) was apparent. At Dumraon, tenants gathered in a phenomenal crowd of 15,000[18] under the banner of the BPKS, and their ranks swelled at demonstrations at Buxar, Piro, Behea and Nawanagar.[19] With the forcible tilling of *bakasht* land, the BPKS became completely *non-grata*. Banned by the BPCC, whose decision was subsequently ratified by the Congress Working Committee (CWC) in January 1938, the split with the BPKS was irrevocable. The *bakasht* issue simmered in Bhabua and Sasaram subdivisions as late as January 1938 but by that time northern Shahabad, far away, was getting embroiled in a crisis that was to occupy more Congress attention and predictable BPKS neglect and apathy.

In the canal-irrigated areas of northern Shahabad the crash of the 1930s resulted in an abnormal fall in the price of foodgrains. Consequently, the tenant was hard-pressed to cough up the flat water-rates. That the Congress leadership realised the potential for an anti-British agitation was obvious. On 24 December 1931 Rajendra Prasad appealed in a written note to M.G. Hallet, Chief Secretary to the government of Bihar and Orissa:

"I have to address you on the question of canal rates in the district of Shahabad. The recent abnormal fall in prices and the general depression have been acting as great handicaps on the tenants who have been irrigating their lands with canal water. The canal rates together with the rents make a heavy demand which it has become increasingly difficult for tenants to meet owing to the slump. It will be noticed that the canal

[18] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 October 1937.
[19] Fortnightly Report of the Patna Commissioner, 26 March 1937.

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rates have been raised considerably within the last 40 years or so and this has happened almost *pari passu* with rise in prices of foodstuffs and grains as the following statement will show.

Year	*Canal Rate per acre* Rs. As. Ps.	*Foodstuffs Sold per Rupee* *seers*	*chattaks*
1886	1-0-0	16	
1890	1-8-0	15	12
1896	2-0-0	12	12 2/3
1902	2-8-0	11	14
1906	3-0-0	10	14 1/2
1914	3-8-0	8	12
1921	4-8-0	7	3

"The prices have gone back to the level of the nineties of the last century and it is not surprising that tenants with the current ruling prices are unable to meet the heavy demands made on them for canal rates and by the landlords. The situation is already grave and relief in the form of reduction of rates is urgently called for. . . .I request that early steps may be taken to reduce the canal rates to the level prevalent at the time when prices are also on the same level as at present. I have further to request that collection of rate may be put off till February next by which time the paddy crop may be expected to be placed in the market and bring in cash for tenants."[20]

Tenants and zamindars were at agreement here. The time was right, too, as the early 30s coincided with the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The canal issue, being above-class character, seemed ideally suited for Congress patronage than, for instance, 'the chaukidari tax' issue in Uttar Pradesh.

The Working Committee of the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) at a meeting held at the Sadaqat Ashram, Patna, discuss-

[20]*The Searchlight*, 29 December 1931.

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ed the report of the Agrarian Enquiry Committee and passed a resolution "Having considered the report of the Canal Enquiry Committee, the Working Committee (WC) is of the opinion that on account of abnormal fall in the prices of foodgrains [and] on account of great distress in the rural areas the government should be approached with a request to reduce the canal rates to the level of those which prevailed in the same year when the prices of the foodstuffs were the same as those current in the present year, and further to postpone realisation till February next."[21]

Even towards the end of 1931 the water agitation showed no signs of waning. The Shahabad DCC circulated a notice entitled *Nahar ke Basuli ke Janch* (Enquiry into the Canal Rate) signed by Srikrishna Singh, Prof. Abdul Bari and Baldev Sahay. All leading Congressmen descended on Shahabad. Touring the district along with two Congress leaders of Arrah, Gupteshwar Pande and Bindhyachal Prasad, they held meetings at Bikramganj, Koran-Saraiya, Jamuli (Raipur block), Dumraon and Chaunsa. They conferred with local zamindars in the area, who according to an official report, believed that "if the current prices remain at their present rate for a period of 7/8 years, not only would it be essential to have a substantial reduction in the rates but also that rents payable would have to be decreased."[22]

The government response was underlined by its basic motive of maintaining the zamindar nexus, restraining the tenant and containing the Congress. With the canal issue the Congress could bring both miserable tenants and prosperous zamindars together and thus freeze, temporarily, zamindar-tenant antagonism at the grassroot level. In the past, the pro-zamindari slant of the Congress had been revealed by its refusal to sponsor the no-tax issue.

M.G. Hallett responded to Rajendra Prasad unambiguously: "The Congress Canal rate agitation was waged against the government, it must be noted and not against zamindars."[23]

[21]*The Searchlight*, 24 December 1931.

[22]A Note on the Shahabad DM's interview with some zamindars on 5 December 1931.

[23]File 34/1931, Government of Bihar and Orissa, Patna, 9 December 1931.

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Thus it was "difficult to take up or rectify any bona fide grievance" because the agitation had begun. Certain that it was being "undoubtedly engineered by the Congress for their own ends," the District Magistrate of Shahabad called some zamindars on 5 December 1931 in order to counteract the agitation. On learning that they had already held discussions with the Congress leaders he reprimanded them. Insisting in future to have "absolutely nothing to do with the Congress people in this matter and to try to persuade their tenants not to do so also," he added: "The government was prepared to put down with a firm hand any agitation of the present nature and they should shape their conduct accordingly."

The District Magistrate meant business. Under the charge of subversive speeches Srikrishna Singh, who had made many references to Kuar Singh, the legendary 1857 mutineer of Jagdishpur, Shahabad, was arrested under section 144. But the agitation continued. It dragged on till January 1932 and the raiyats of Raipur block petitioned Mr Glass, the Chief Engineer of the Irrigation Department, seeking water-rate reduction and rent postponement. But the District Magistrate unrelentingly issued instructions to the local officers to drive home to the tenants the point that the canal department if closed on this issue would only bring starvation to them, that the Congress was only interested in pursuing political gain and not the cultivators' interests by championing the agitation. They were to be also warned that if they insisted on not paying the canal rates the government would collect them as notified liabilities as they had done in Champaran district.[24] The government got its way. At a conference held at Arra on 22 January 1932 N.F. Peck, the District Magistrate (DM) after conferring with Glass, overruled the entreaties of subordinate Indian officers. Subsequently, the government was informed that there was no real economic necessity for any reduction of the canal water rates and "if anything at all were done it should be by way of a small temporary remission."[25] The Congress agitation fizzled out, though the issue lingered.

Tenants continued to remain the victim of political vagaries.

[24]Note of Shahabad DM, 5 December 1931.
[25]*Ibid.*

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Socially, in Shahabad, the backward and scheduled-caste tenants bore the brunt. The Risely woe had gripped them. And by the time the next Census after 1901 came in 1911, considerable consternation had built up. Hundreds of petitions were received from different castes—their weight alone came to one and a half maunds—requesting that they might be known by a new name, be placed higher in the order of precedence, be recognised as Kshatriya and Vaishya. Many castes were aggrieved at the position assigned them and complained that it lowered them in public estimation. But the response was more than a mere outcome of Risely's inadvertent error and the British were aware of its implications. In South Bihar particularly, there was enough tinder that lay dry and combustible.

"The realisation of illegal exactions by the landlords such as *abwabs* and *begari* is undoubtedly on the decline: But it cannot yet be said that such practices are rare. Another source of friction is the determination of some of the lower castes to improve their social status. Strained agrarian relations commonly lead to an epidemic of applications for the commutation of produce-rent. While these applications themselves are often responsible for a further exacerbation of feeling."[26] "This activity is to be found mainly among the upper ranks of the Sudra castes. . . who for some years have been striving to improve their social status. . .some of their ambitions are legitimate enough, but the danger arising therefrom is obvious."[27]

In Shahabad, a caste awakening could be clearly seen. The major backward castes, i.e., Ahirs (13.1%), Kurmis (13.3%) and Koeris (8.0%) constituted 34.4 per cent of the total population, about one-third. More acutely, the issue of indignity provided dry tinder. The legend of Mahtin Dai, in whose memory a temple stands at Behea, Bhojpur, symbolised the culture of passive violation for the lower castes. According to O'Malley, Behea was formerly the home of a branch of Harihobans Rajputs. According to their own traditions, they were originally settled at Ratanpur in the Central Provinces, but in A.D. 850 they migrated northwards to Manjha on the Gogra in the Saran district, where they waged a successful war with the

[26]Lacey (1928: 97-98).
[27]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

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aboriginal Cheros. Two centuries later they left Manjha and settled south of the Ganges at Behea and after a struggle lasting several hundred years subdued the Cheros who then held the country. In or about 1528 the Raja Bhopat Deo violated Mahini, a Brahmin woman, who thereupon burnt himself to death and in dying imprecated the most fearful curses on the Harihobans Rajputs. After this tragedy the clan left Behea and moved across the Ganges to Ballia in United Provinces.

The legend that surrounds the violated woman differs in other accounts. Another chronicler records, that at Behea, there used to be a Raja called Ran Pal Singh. He was a tyrant and used to take *dola*, i.e. compel every bride to pass the first night after marriage with him. This resulted in a severe clash with the tyrant and Mahtin Dai's supporters were killed. The bridegroom was also killed in the encounter and the bride observed *sati*. Stories and legends have never ceased to surround the memory of Mahtin. Close to the railway station of Behea women in large numbers congregate every Tuesday and offer prayers to Mahtin Dai. O'Malley recorded that nothing would induce members of the Harihobans sect to enter Behea, though it was once the chief seat of the clan.

Mahtin's memory formed the blistered, calloused, cognitive memories of scores of illiterate lower-caste people whose women continued to be violated by lusty upper-caste zamindars. The *dola* tradition prevailed in the Rajput and Bhumihar dominated region of Shahabad. By the 1930s resentment among the more articulate section of the backward castes was gaining ground and the words *izzat* and *larai* were being more frequently used. In fact, the backward castes all over the country were getting more and more restive.

The *Ahir* (Goala) movement which developed around 1914 in Patna district was part of a national river of dissent. In 1912 the formation of the Gopi Jatiya Sabha gradually spread to cow-herding *jatis* all over North India from Punjab to Bengal. A monthly journal, *Ahir Samachar* published by the Sabha from Mainpuri in the United Provinces attracted several thousand Ahirs from different parts of North India.[28] Even the Kurmis

[28]M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, University of California Press, 1966, p. 10.

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joined in. Deep Narain Singh had exhorted the Kurmi community, through a journal *Kurmi Kshatriya Hitaishi* as early as 1908 to revive the Sabha tradition. Finally on 5 March 1910 a Sabha was held at Eklaspur village in the Bhabua subdivision of Shahabad district and subsequently the All India Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha was registered in Patna. Support from the Kurmi sections in Patna, Monghyr and Nalanda districts in South Bihar and from Darbhanga and Muzzafarpur across the Ganges provided it with ready fire. As the thirties drew closer the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris were bridging their social distance and joining together in a broader unity. This unity was provided, to a large extent, by the long British rule.[29]

Unity was necessary and in 1930 a district-level conference of Yadavas and Koeris was convened in the village of Garve in Kargahar block (now in the district of Rohtas). Its minutes were dramatic. Dr Sheopujan Prasad Singh, a Kurmi leader and an important member of the Kurmi Mahasabha, arrived to find he was to preside over two separate conferences. Furious, he reproached the organisers and asked them to merge into one organisation. After that, at a common venue Chaturgan Singh, an Ahir from Jitaura village of Piro, and Ramanarain Singh, a Koeri from the village of Tenuni in Bikramaganj, urged him to preside over their union. The mood was struck. A unity that had eluded them for long achieved.

Subsequently, in 1934 the Triveni Sangh, symbolising the unity of Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris, was formed at a Shahabad district conference. The name was provided by Dr Sheopujan Prasad Singh.[30] Its aims were like any other caste sabha, broad and comprehensive: fostering solidarity among different sections of the caste community, participation in democratic politics, opposing and retaliating upper-caste tyranny like *corvee*, *begar*,

[29]That national solidarity could be arrived at was largely an outcome of British rule in India. Srinivas argues that the establishment of 'Pax Britannica' set caste free from the territorial limitation inherent in the pre-British polity, i.e., in organisational terms, from the endogamous caste panchayats to horizontal solidarity of caste sabhas.

[30]The name is wrongly believed to be given by Guru Sahay Lal, an advocate who figured prominently in the leadership on the backward caste movements of the 1930s (Mahendra P. Singh: *Cohesion in a Predominant Party: The Pradesh Congress and Party Politics in Bihar*).

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rape and social ostracism. Gaucharan Singh Chaudhary, a Kurmi from Eklaspur village in Bhabua subdivision and an Ara-based lawyer, was elected as president, and an Ahir from Dumraon, Raghuvir Singh, designated as secretary.

Two years later, in 1936, the second district conference was held at the village of Barhara in Piro *thana* in Shahabad. At Barhara the class theme threatened to emerge because the ideologues defined the Sangh as an organisation incorporating the aspirations of kisans, mazdoors and small traders. By now, straining at the seams with a muster-roll membership of 1,000,000, the backward castes who paid an annual membership fee of four annas had built the Sangh into a sizable force. At Barhara, new people were elected: Babu Shiv Sunder Prasad Singh, a Kurmi lawyer from Sasaram, was chosen as president and to the post of secretary was designated an Ahir from Ara Mofussil, Ramraj Singh. Elections to these posts were to continue till the Sangh was finally absorbed in the Backward Classes Federation in 1948.

Around this time, 1935-37, it was decided to form a provincial Triveni Sangh. Two significant men were put at its helm: Guru Sahay Lal, a bitter critic of the upper castes,[31] was chosen as its spokesman, and a Kurmi, Dasu Singh, was elected president. The growing mood of intransigence proceeded the imminent elections of 1937 and the Sangh was already fixing its eyes on the hustings.

The Congress was aware of its growth and in certain quarters some Congressmen were already rueing this development. Anugraha Narayan Sinha lamented years later: "It has been my experience over the last fifteen years that as long as the Congress kept its members away from the clutches of governmental institutions and posts of an enslaved India, the evil of casteism was avoided in Bihar; but as soon as the Congress members became entrenched in power, casteism spread . . ."[32] More so, the idea of the Sangh not accepting any political tutelage and maintaining its distinctive entity was uncomfortable to the

[31]Guru Sahay Lal, had suffered humiliation at the hands of some of the advanced caste elites which ultimately led him to organise the backward communities. (*Mahendra P. Singh*)

[32]Anugraha Narayan Sinha, *Mere Sansmaran*, p. 4.

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Shahabad DCC as well as the BPCC leadership. Even Mahatma Gandhi was irked, according to Dasu Singh, a prominent leader of the Triveni Sangh.

The Sangh was smarting under its past electoral defeats when they had contested in the significant district board elections in 1930-31 and lost. Winning these elections was crucial because it implied tickets to the higher echelons of political power. Among those who had contested were Tapsi Ram, a Koeri from Begampur, Sheopujan Singh an Ahir from Jitaura village in Piro thana, Raghu Vir Singh, a Koeri from Dumraon, Nandkishore Singh, an Ahir from Tenuni in Jagdishpur thana who became later leaders of considerable stature. Behind the debacle lay economic reasons: Only those who were paying Rs 64 as *maalguzari* tax were eligible to contest the elections. Years later Kesari 'Master' rued the day, "We did not have even money."

When the elections of 1937 came the memory of defeat still rankled. Initially the Congress responded to the Sangh's request for tickets. But Rajendra Prasad insisted that only those who had participated in the Congress movement would be considered. Resentment grew. The final shock came when none of the proposed names appeared on the nominee lists.

The motley crowd that gathered at Tapsi Mahto's house at Begampur were agitated that evening. Tapsi Mahto thundered, "*Ye saale Congress wale bhik mangne se bhi seat nahi denge to izzat ke larai karni hongi*" (If these cursed Congressites do not give us seats even on begging, then we must fight for our honour). An unbridgable rift had developed.

For the Triveni Sangh the Shahabad DCC by this act had betrayed its upper-caste character.[33] The defeat in Shahabad

[33](*a*) List of delegates from Shahabad to the 25th Indian National Congress, Allahabad, 1910 (Shahabad DCC):

Pandit Gobardhan Muna (B.A., B.L.	Brahmin	Vakil, Gaya
Babu Avadh Behari Lal	Kayastha	Zamindar, Gaya
Pandit Gaya Dutt Misser	Brahmin	Pleader, Ara
Babu Indra Deo Narayan Singh	Rajput	Zamindar, Shahabad
Mangal Charan (B.A., B.L.)	Kayastha	Vakil, Ara

(*b*) Leading members of the Shahabad DCC during the 1930s Sheopujan Rai of Piro (Bhumihar), Kapildev Chaudhary of Dumraon (Bhumihar), Sardar Harihar Singh (Rajput), Hargoband Mishra (Brahmin).

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was part of a larger, state-level collapse.[34] From the district two Triveni Sangh nominees had been set up: Nandkishore Singh from Piro and Tapsi Mahto from Ara. Following their defeat a hysteria of upper-caste vendetta on the backwards was unleashed. In Jagdishpur, four Ahirs were killed in clashes during the pre-election campaign. 'After the Congress victory the Rajput landlords of Ayar village in Jagdishpur thana pillaged a nearby village, Lacchmipur, because the resident Ahirs and Koeris had extended electoral support to the Sangh.

A Rajput landlord, Kobari Singh, was killed in the ensuing fracas.[35] But despite the defeat, the resurgence and hope it created in the hearts and minds of the backward-caste electorate was significant from the votes they polled.[36] Ramraj Singh, reminiscing, kept saying, "*Vote se hum bhale har gaye, lathi sey nahi hare.*" (We lost by votes, but our lathis remained.)

Towards the Triveni Sangh, the Congress policy of intolerance was amply clear. But there was another 'soft line' that was held out. As early as 1935 provincial level backward-caste leaders like Dev Sharan Singh, Beerchand Patel and Sheonandan Mandal had been co-opted into the Congress. Representing the Backward Classes Federation, an organisation sponsored and fostered by Congress patronage, they tried to persuade the Triveni Sangh to give up its independent existence. By winning over the backward-caste leaders, lobbies in the BPCC succeeded in keeping their vote banks intact.[37] In the eyes of the Triveni

[34]Triveni Sangh candidates in Bihar: Jadu Mahto (Koeri) – Gaya, Sardar Jagdev Singh (Ahir) – Barh, Ramcharitar Chaurasia (Bareiye) – Hajipur, Ganpati Mandal – Bhagalpur; Dasu Singh (Kurmi) – Patna.

[35]Interview with Ramraj Singh on 2 December 1980 at Ara, Bhojpur.

[36]Results of the 1937 general elections (Shahabad) *Ara Constituency*:

Harnandan Singh (Rajput) – Congress	1'911 votes
Tapsi Mahto (Koeri) – Triveni Sangh	5877 votes
East Central Shahabad:	
Budhan Koy Verma (Rajput) – Congress	19211 votes
Nandkishore Prasad (Kurmi) – Triveni Sangh	5104 votes

(*Source:* BPCC records)

[37] Anugraha Narayan Sinha group: Raghunath Singh (Ahir) – Dumraon, Rampirit Singh (Ahir) – Sahar, Sheonandan Mandal – Saharsa, Beerchand Patel. Srikrishna Singh group: Ram Lakhan Singh (Jadhav), Dev Sharan Singh (Koeri) – Baruhi, Sahar, Rajaram Arya (Koeri) – Nawanagar.

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Sangh these leaders were however totally discredited.

On the other hand the British were keen to play the middle game. They did not discourage the malfunctioning of the caste system but rather encouraged its distorted continuity by according higher status to certain groups, granting bills and land. In particular, the sustenance of backward-caste organisations, outside the Congress and opposed to its upper-caste composition, was an integral part of British policy. When Ramraj Singh approached the district authorities for backward-class employment in the cess evaluation scheme, 400 posts were set aside for them.

Despite Congress intolerance and its attempt to club together other sections of the lower castes in the Depressed Classes League under Jagjivan Ram, the Triveni Sangh survived. The meetings that were organised in Shahabad as part of greater Bihar's support for the All India Anti-Untouchability League in early 1932 did not elicit any mentionable support from the backward castes. They viewed the untouchables as a suspect category, suceptible to upper-caste Congress wooing, who in their eyes were keen to see the dismemberment or absorption of the Sangh.

When the district board elections came round in 1938, Shahabad was rocked by tremors again. Backward-caste ideologues like Dasu Singh and Guru Sahay Lal visited and campaigned in the district for the Triveni Sangh. The organisation fielded 30 candidates and 8-9 were successful in defeating Congress nominees. The victory, despite individual cases of violence, assured large sections of the backward-castes of a growth in strength.

But in the long run the Triveni Sangh-Congress conflict took its toll. The composition of the Sangh leadership did considerable damage. Most of its leaders came from an educated, propertied class[38] which could only elicit a limited caste response despite its secular character.[39] In the eyes of other backward-caste sections

[38]Shiv Nandan Mandal from Saharsa owned 400 bighas; Guru Sahay Lal was a rich farmer and lawyer; Ramraj Singh, was a practising, propertied vakil; Jai Narain Singh (Bettiah), Deo Narayan Singh (Ara), Basudev Singh (Purnea), Beerchand Patel (Hajipur) were all prosperous.

[39]Harijans and Muslims were members of the Triveni Sangh; its candi-

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it slowly came to be viewed solely as an Ahir-Koeri-Kurmi syndicate. A caste response to an essentially class problem—the underlying theme of *abwabs*, *begar*, landlessness (*bakasht*) and social ostracism—thus failing to unhinge the Congress from its bases of support. By 1946, its absorption in the Congress was nearly complete.

In fact, the process of assimilation had started even earlier. Members of the Sangh were given posts in the early 1940s. In 1946 Triveni Sangh members contested the election on an all-Bihar level, but on Congress tickets. Finally in 1948 the Sangh merged with the Congress-sponsored Backward Classes Federation surrendering its individual existence.

With it, the seeds of a deeper conflict, that lay in the backward-caste resurgence, failed to sprout. The Congress and its patrons were quick to understand the potential of the Triveni Sangh to develop into a class organisation by the issues they raised. On the other hand, the BPKS, the only pro-tenant organisation, remained aloof from the caste-resurgence of the backwards. The *bakasht* problem and the reduction of rent (*lagaan*) which the BPKS espoused rallied a tenantry which was moderately landed. Further, the policy decision of the BPKS of keeping issues that pertained to small peasants and agricultural labourers under the carpet hamstrung its spread among the large sections of the tenantry.

The bridge between the Bhumihar messiah, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, and ideologues of the Triveni Sangh was never built. Despite the fact that members of the Sangh flocked to listen to the Swami's message of common struggle, the Bhumihar label stuck. When Kesari 'Master' visited the Swami's ashram at Bihta in Patna district, night had fallen. Looking around he saw that those who surrounded the Swami were all upper-caste Bhumihars. Horrified, the backward-caste leader crept away under the cover of darkness.

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dates for the 1946 elections included a Dusadh from Udwantnagar and Kazi Kafiullah, a Muslim from Dinara.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Second Coming

Roi roi ke kaheli Sudhama se Bahuriya,
dinwa patar bhaele,

khaike sattua neikhe
raheke jhopriya neikhe,
dinwa patar bhaele

gorwaye juta neikhe
dinwa patar bhaele.[1]

Wolf Ladejinsky, the World Bank expert, returned from Shahabad, hot and fuming. In the scorching heat of Bihar in June 1963, the prospects of the Intensive Area Development Project (IADP) appeared grim. Under the auspices of the Third Five Year Plan, the IADP, popularly known as the Package Programme, had been started in Shahabad in October 1960. Its objective: Green Revolution. Allayed by the assured water resources of the Sone Canal System, the southwest district in South Bihar seemed ideal. But according to Ladejinsky, the Green Revolution was grounded. Stuck in the black-gray slime

[1]A poor-peasant song composed by Musahar Bihari Ram of Ekwari, Sahar.

Crying, Sudhama tells Bahuriya,
Days are lean.

No *sattu* to eat
No hut to live in
Days are lean.

No shoes on our feet
Days are lean.

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on the banks of the Sone, stifled by factors that the development experts and food strategists never comprehended.

In fact, there were signs that the Green Revolution could turn red. The most crucial area of tenant discord remained. Most of them having no status were at the mercy of their landlords. In the embittered dialogue Wolf Ladejinsky had with the government of Bihar, he bitterly argued, "The provisions for security of tenure are crucial to the whole scheme of land legislation and it has been the experience all over India that the right to resume land for self-cultivation by the landlord has tended to defeat the provisions for security of tenure. Resumption is all the more damaging in the case of small landlords who have made up viable units of cultivation by leasing an additional acre or two of the land."[2]

Two decades of non-implemented agrarian legislation had reduced the tenant to a state of an impotent, insecure raiyat. Ladejinsky complained of the vague land records in Shahabad in which the tenant did not figure. Clear about its causes, he continued, "Ejection of tenants has taken place in the past and the landlords still continue to change tenants from plot to plot to defeat the tenancy law. The few tenants who were allowed to continue over a fairly long period also feel insecure. Thus, a large number of cultivators hold no title to the leased lands, pay exorbitant rents and are never certain of their status. They are left with little to subsist on and much less to invest. The reason for this state of affairs is twofold: one is the faulty legislation itself; and the second is the negative attitude of the government officials at state, district, block or village levels."[3]

The Ceilings Act resulted in massive resumption of leased land and consequent ejection of tenants. But that was the last straw. There was an intermediate slavery in a district where the Minimum Wages Act was a cruel joke. The plight of the sharecropper was equally miserable. Broadly, two modes of sharecropping patterns were prevalent. One, in which the lessor and the lessee shared 50-50 of the inputs, minus irrigation and labour costs, but divided the output equally. The second, where

[2]Wolf Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business*, OUP, 1970, p. 337.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 336.

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both input and output is calculated by the leasor who invested two-thirds of the input, the lessee one-third. The output was shared equally.

In the contract, the sharecropper bore the brunt of bad harvests, being legally bound to return a specified amount in kind annually. To make ends meet he could count on his *banihar* —a labourer who was provided with a certain amount of land (*kola*) for attached labour, and who for all practical purposes was a bonded slave. The woe of the numerous *banihars*, day after day, struck the most plaintive note in the agrarian order. The landless Chamars and Musahars lived like animals in hovels less than a man's length, subsisting on three to five rupees per day and the master's *kesari*—an animal feed made of husk which produced painful skin disorders and often arthritis.

In Shahabad, the oppression of the lower castes at the hands of the upper castes did not flow from numerical superiority but rather from niches in the economic hierarchy *apropos* land ownership and the monopoly over labour.[4] Further the culture of violence ensured that the Chamar or the Musahar never raises his head in protest.

Though *begar* was a thing of the past, the *banihar* worked often for nothing. Wearing a clean dhoti, remaining seated in the presence of the master even on a cot outside his own hut, walking erect were taboo. When the evenings fell or in lonely stretches of field, the rape of his womenfolk by landlords' *latheiths* and scions completed a picture of unbridled Rajput-Bhumihar overlordship.

Rape of lower-caste women by Rajputs and Bhumihars was a tradition almost. It had been an issue in the Triveni Sangh movement and the habit persisted. Often taken as one of the prerogatives of the overlord, it at times had roots in the sexual

[4]Agricultural Census, 1970-71.

	% of Holdings	*% of Area*
Marginal peasants	78.5	30.9
Small peasants	12.3	23.0
Medium peasants	7.7	30.9
Rich peasants	1.3	11.2
Landlords	0.2	4.0
	100.00	100.00

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scenario of the upper castes. The poor man-woman ratio among the Bhumihars and the Rajputs was a case in point. 25 per cent of the Bhumihars married women of other castes from outside the district; as far as the Rajputs are concerned they often purchased women from the tribal areas of Chotanagpur and Santhal Parganas. These 'outsider women' were then rehabilitated into the local social order by marriage and custom. But within the social constraints the suppressed sexual hunger of the predominant upper castes often found unrestrained outlet among the women from the poor, lower castes of Bhojpur—notably Chamars and the docile Musahars.

But by 1967, there were deep rumblings, in Shahabad. In Bihar, a general spirit of non-Congressism prevailed, aided by the Bihar famine of 1966-67, proliferating stories of state-level Congress corruption and the pre-election firings on students. In the wake of this state-wide non-Congressism, the socialist ideologue Dr Ram Manohar Lohia was steering an enduring non-Congress coalition. On his presumption, i.e. the Congress cannot be dislodged from power unless all the opposition parties unite against it irrespective of ideologies and policies, strange bedfellows were coming together. Working on this strategy, the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and Socialist Unity Centre (SUC) coordinated resources and reduced the Congress to shambles.

1967 saw the emergence of a coalition ministry, with the SSP in the majority, winning a phenomenal number of 128 seats. Even in the former Congress district, Shahabad, the SSP won seven seats. Behind their enviable success, three decades in Shahabad had ensured that the Socialists were if nothing else, at least half-way messiahs of the poor.

The spread of Socialist ideology in the district was largely the handiwork of Ram Ekbal, Laxman Singh, Raghunath Gope and Pranav Chatterjee. Prior to the 1952 split in the Socialist Party, there were notable founding fathers in Shahabad—Dharichan Singh, a Rajput from Karath, Ram Ekbal, the Ahir 'Gandhi' of Piro block in Bhojpur, Kamlakant Verma, a Koeri

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of Chaurahi village in Piro, and Ramsakal Singh, an Ahir from Arrah. Along with men like Ram Nagina Singh, Ram Singhasan Singh, Radha Mohan Rai in Tarari block and Raghunath Rai in Sahar block the Socialists inched forward. They succeeded in carving out a political base in the prosperous IADP wheat-bowl of northern Shahabad;[5] Sahar and Tarari blocks came to be known as Socialist, PSP and subsequently SSP strongholds.

Social oppression of the backward, landless castes was an accepted reality of Bhojpur and the Socialists rose to challenge it. Dharichan Singh fought a prolonged, legal battle over the rape of a Chamar woman by the Rajput landlords of Karath in 1957-58. In Orsi village of Tarari block, Ram Ekbal endeavoured to break prevailing social mores by bringing the prostitutes of the village into the stream of social acceptability. Further, they adroitly combined caste and class factors and succeeded in weaning the middle peasant sections of the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris to their fold. There were obvious advantages—notably, the huge numerical strength of the major backward castes.[6] Scores of village school-teachers, backward-caste *mukhiyas* and rural youths turned to them as their champions.

The upper-caste landlords viewed them as an incipient caste threat, because by the late sixties the Socialists were being increasingly identified as an Ahir-Kurmi-Koeri-Party. When the

[5]Most of the IADP activity has been centred on the 50% irrigated blocks of the district, e.g. Rajpur, Itarhi, Nawanagar, Piro, Charpokhri, Tarari, Sahar, Sandesh, Jagdishpur and Udwantnagar.

[6]*Upper caste*	%	*Lower/backward castes*	%
Bhumihar	4.61	Ahir	20.55
Brahmin	15.02	Kurmi	4 44
Kayastha	2.74	Koeri	11.19
Rajput	15.08	Other	26.37
	37.45		62.55

In gross, absolute figures: the population of Shahabad being 12.3 lakhs, the caste groupings would roughly be upper caste: 3.89 lakhs; backward castes and lower castes: 6.51 lakhs; scheduled castes: 1.90 lakhs.

(Computed from the 1921 Census of India).

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SSP triumphed in 1967, they won 7 out of 22 seats in Shahabad, four of them being won by Ahirs. In private, Ramasakal Singh admitted, "*Haamare char aadmi jite*" (Four of our men won). They were Ram Sakal Singh himself from Sandesh, Chandradev Prasad Verma from Baliganj, Tulsi Singh from Karakat and Ramdeo Singh from Raghunathpur.

It appeared like a second coming since the Triveni Sangh in the thirties. The struggle that was launched by the Socialist Kamlakant Verma brought the village of Chaurahi in Piro block into unusual prominence. The canal water flow being small and irregular in the blocks of Sahar, Sandesh, Piro and Jagdishpur, it caused economic anxiety to the tenants. Chaurahi refused to pay canal-rent around 1954-56. The struggle turned violent. When officers came to confiscate the property of the no-rent agitationists, they were attacked. The agitation continued till 1962-63 with the Socialists in Chaurahi refusing to pay rent.

At Ara, under the leadership of Ram Sakal Singh, the Socialists fought against the flour-mill proprietors who were making exorbitant profits at the cost of the poor producers. Both these struggles did not meet the deep-seated landlord interests in rural Shahabad squarely and failed to go further into the cultural aspects of kulak violence. The theme of Harijan dignity got submerged under the electoral ambitions of an emergent, prosperous Ahir-Kurmi-Koeri combine. Poor peasants and the landless remained largely neglected.

Canal agitations continued to be the main issue on which political forces in the district continued to agitate. As early as 1953, after the address of Ravi Narayan Reddy at Ramna Maidan, Arrah, the Communist Party of India (CPI) had come into being in Bhojpur. Among the leaders, there were largely educated Rajputs and Brahmins: Rajputs like Chandrama Singh, an associate of the legendary revolutionary Bhagat Singh, Bindeswari Singh, Satya Narayan Singh; Brahmins like Pandit Muktinath Mishra and an occasional Koeri like Suraj Prasad and an Ahir, Sant Prasad. With these men the CPI could begin to explore the areas of Ara Mofussil, Koelwar, Tarari and Nawanagar, in short, the flood-affected blocks of north Bhojpur, for a following.

Over this issue the Socialists and CPI came together. At first the 1955-56 canal-rate agitation was begun by SSP leaders

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like Ram Ekbal. Ramnagina Dusadh and Laxman Singh, when the canal rates were raised from five to ten rupees. An issue that involved the blocks of Sahar, Piro, Sandesh and Nawanagar predominantly. From the village of Ekwari in Sahar block – which later became the Naxalbari of Bhojpur—there were arrests, too. Ramnaresh Dusadh, known as Mukhiyaji, and Maharaj Mahto were picked up as CPI activists in the agitation. Later it was around Ramnaresh that the Naxalite movement in Sahar materialised—the extremist circle of Ramnaresh Mukhiya, Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir. More than three hundred members of the CPI were arrested during the canal agitation.

The Sone river did not relent either, and the misery of the poor tenants on its banks provided both the Socialists and the Communists with an issue to agitate. Even as late as 1974 the rapacious role of tax collectors in the district was condemned. In March 1974, a Congress MLA from Buxar, one of the two halves into which Shahabad was divided, the other being Bhojpur, condemned the government officials of Bhojpur for forcibly extracting levy and land rent, particularly in the flood-affected *diara* of north Bhojpur.

By the time Lohia died in 1969 and the Shoshit Dal created by B.P. Mandal, which led to the collapse of SVD Ministry, got going, deeper rumblings had been set in motion. In Shahabad, a group of people close to the CPI and the SSP were growing tired with the slow pace of Lohiaism. Within the CPI dissensions had began to grow. And by the time the "Moscow paper" was being compiled the party in Bhojpur was headed for a split. After the desertion of prominent CPI leaders to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) in 1964 and the consequent loss of Kesho Prasad Singh from Baruhan village of Brahmpur, Dhirja Thakur from Dawath and Satya Narayan Singh, the CPI never recovered. In 1966 it was under the leadership of the CPM that the first agricultural-labourer struggle for better wages was organised. In the struggle one of the major leaders, Bir Bahadur Singh, was killed by the *latheiths* of landlords.

There was more to come. Within the CPM itself the pro-Peking group led by Satya Narayan Singh was already putting out feelers to dissident factions within the CPM in West Bengal. And as early as 1968 Sushital Raychaudhury, one of the

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Marxists who became prominent among the Naxalite leadership of Bengal, addressed a dissident CPM group in Hassan Bazar, Piro. Events had begun to move fast.

Among the educated members of the backward castes there was an awakening, too. The price of education was heavy. And the resistance that was growing among the upper-caste landlords vis-a-vis the educated Kurmi, Koeri and Ahir youths often bordered on violence. In fact, all the issues of the Triveni Sangh remained, except the partial Sanskritisation of some of its leaders. They by now were a tame co-opted lot.

As late as May 1975 Pranav Chatterjee, a former chairman of the state SSP, alleged that in Bhojpur caste arrogance continued. Doms—members of the sweeper caste—who were assembling for an innocuous caste panchayat, were mercilessly assaulted by the upper castes as well as the police. In the village of Neemaj in Brahmpur block, Bhojpur, a small boy was killed and 15 seriously injured. Subsequently the police who detained some did so on the charge that they were a group of dacoits.[7]

But atrocities like this were being viewed differently by a section of people—significantly by educated backward-caste boys who were unwilling to look at them with the servility of their forefathers. There were many who remembered the awakening in the 1930s. Kesari 'Master' was still alive in the village of Lacchmipur in Ara Mufussil: "Nothing had basically changed. Except that some of us got surnames like 'Singh' and the sacred thread. There is no more *begar*, but our women are still raped. The dignity that the Sangh had created still moved us when we saw the atrocities continue. Without us the Naxalite movement could not have taken place."

The problem of dignity remained like a long-lit fuse cheek by jowl with the growth of prosperity in the backward-caste households—an outcome of the Green Revolution in Bhojpur. People even talked of Sahar as the "Haryana of Bihar". It was in the most prosperous block—Sahar—that discontent began to brew.

Situated on the southern bank of the Sone, Sahar is about 50 kilometres west of the Ara railway station. Consisting of 112 villages, it has a large scheduled-caste population: 18,352

[7]*The Indian Nation*, 24 May 1975.

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out of a total population of 1,12,075. South of Sahar flowed the Sone; on its north a 17-kilometre-long canal provided its villages with irrigation water. In Sahar the cost of land was high— often exorbitant. With its silt-laden soil it had burgeoned into a model block of the IADP, but the tenants continued to live in squalor.

In the village of Ekwari, Sahar, the notes that were made by Buchanan were still true, though the "pretty large village of cultivators" now had more shops and artificers. Buses stopped there on the road from Ara to Khaira. Jagdish Mahto, a Koeri from the village, grew up to become a teacher. His uncle was a Communist but that did not affect him, except that he did not look up at the Bhumihars of the village with respect. He did not even get up from the cot in their presence—a heinous crime in their eyes. But they came to know him as the Koeri lad who was now a "Master".

Educated, he liked the company of Ramnaresh Dusadh. Unlike the rest, he aspired to go high in life. For the tenants, life continued to be miserable. After Shahabad was bifurcated in 1973-74 into the districts of Bhojpur and Rohtas, Bhojpur suffered: only one-third of the fertile land and less than 20 per cent of the irrigated land came to the district. In certain places of north Bhojpur, like Ara Mofussil, most of the land suffered under the ravages of the annual floods. The construction of the Ballia-Baria bund on the left bank of the Ganga in UP and the Maner-Saidabad embankment on the right bank of the Sone in Patna district, was a major factor. Only one *rabi* crop, some yield from the *bhadai*, but the fields remained barren at places. Sahar, in contrast, suffered less than the other blocks of Bhojpur. The backward castes continued to reap the gains of the Green Revolution. In fact, the family of Jagdish Mahto, a Koeri household, faced little privation and could afford to produce the first educated Koeri of the village. For the Koeris of Ekwari, Jagdish Mahto was a symbol of pride and achievement.

When the elections of 1967 came around, Jagdish Mahto, who by now had come closer to Ramnaresh Dusadh, the CPI *Mukhiya* of Ekwari, was eager to be there in the village. The fourth general election in Bhojpur was an event. The Socialists were campaigning and in the Sahar reserved constituency, they

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were even contesting the Communists. Rajdeo Ram, from the PSP, was pitted against Jagdish Mahto's associate Ramnaresh Ram. Jagdish was keen to see him win.

On the day of polling, 17 February 1967, Jagdish who had been campaigning went to cast his vote. On the way, he apprehended a Bhumihar, who was rigging the elections in a booth in favour of their candidate Rajdeo Ram. Unable to tolerate this Jagdish apprehended him. And the other Bhumihars, who for long had been waiting to teach the errant and fearless Koeri a lesson, pounced on him. They assaulted Jagdish Mahto so severely that he was hospitalised. That day, broken and humiliated, Jagdish Mahto swore that the war that had ended in the 1930s would be resumed. From the small village of Naxalbari in north Bengal reports of an armed struggle led by peasants were widely covered in the media. And Jagdish swore that in Bhojpur something had to be done. A second coming was near at hand. And this time, not under the leadership of another Triveni Sangh, but under the aegis of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). A violent Maoist road to revolution.

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CHAPTER THREE

Dateline Bhojpur—A Fragmented Story

"From the Naxalbari of 1967 a political creed took its name. From this Naxalbari to Ekwari, a sleeping village till the other day, in the district of Bhojpur in Bihar, is a long trek both on the physical and socio-cultural plane. Whereas Naxalbari has luxurious vegetation, Ekwari is parched and bare and situated on the sandy stretch of the Sone."

—B.N. SINHA

17 February 1967
Ekwari, Sahar

Kamleshwari Devi, the wife of Jagdish Mahto, recounted; "There was a lot of tension in the village and everyone was afraid that violence would erupt at any moment."[2] It was polling day in the Sahar reserved (SC) constituency in the fourth general election to the Bihar State Assembly. The contest was mainly between Rajdeo Ram (Praja Socialist Party), sponsored by the upper-caste landlords and Ramnaresh Ram (Communist Party of India), the *Mukhiya* of Ekwari. Jagdish Mahto, a Koeri by caste, teaching science at H.D. Jain College, Ara, was openly backing Ramnaresh Ram, who enjoyed the support of large sections of lower-caste agricultural labourers and poor peasants. The election had stirred up Ekwari, a village of 6,000 people, and drawn a sharp line between the landlords and labourers.

"My husband kept saying that he would vote because he

[1]*The Searchlight*, 'From Naxalbari to Ekwari', 11 June 1975.

[2]Interview with Kamleshwari Devi at Ara, Bhojpur, on 12 December 1978.

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would not want to regret later if Ramnaresh lost by a single vote. On the other side, the Bhumihars who hated my husband for his audacity, were awaiting an opportunity to teach him a lesson. Despite my entreaties, he left the house at 3 p.m. and went to the booth." At the booth, Ramnaresh tried to prevent Radharaman Singh, a Bhumihar, from rigging votes, and was severely assaulted. Jagdish Mahto was so brutally beaten that he lingered between life and death for five months in hospital. By the time he was on his feet again he had undergone a deep change.

July 1969
Buxar, Ara

Naxalite slogans inciting armed revolution were found on the walls in Ara town. Under the leadership of Satya Narayan Singh, the workers of his party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), took steps to forcibly harvest and loot crops in the *diara* near Buxar. At about the same time pro-Mao posters appeared on the walls of Buxar court buildings.[3]

February 1970
Nathupur, Kudra

Charu Mazumdar addressed a state conference of the CPI (M-L). He emphasised that members of the party should be trained in the use of conventional weapons and they should concentrate their efforts on landless labourers with a view to organising them into guerilla bands for the annihilation of 'class enemies.'[4]

8 October 1970
Patna

An extraordinary meeting of the Bihar Cabinet, called to review the Naxalite upsurge, resolved to give 'special powers' to the police, to 'modernise' the CID and to vigorously enforce

[3]Report of the Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission (RCFIC), p. 12.
[4]*Ibid.*

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the Preventive Detention Act. The Cabinet, presided over by the Congress Chief Minister Daroga Prasad Rai, considered the possibility of providing jeeps to 'all the 571 police stations' in the state and also decided to set up 'special police cells' in Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Monghyr and Jamshedpur 'where Naxalite activities have assumed menacing proportions'.[5] According to official reports 26 persons had been killed and 102 major incidents of violence had occurred in the state since the beginning of Naxalite violence. The Bihar government was also keen to arrest Charu Mazumdar.

23 February 1971
Ekwari, Sahar

The first 'annihilation' by the Naxalites in Bhojpur: That day around dusk, Sheopujan Singh, a *latheith* of the landlords of Ekwari, was found dead beside the Sone Canal outside the village. In the case that was registered by Chitranjan Singh following his murder, Jagdish Mahto, Rameshwar Ahir, Bhikari Kahar, Maharaj Mahto, Singhasan Chamar were implicated. Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir absconded.

To S. Jha, the DSP of Shahabad, the motives were clear:

"This is a pre-planned cold-blooded, brutal murder. It transpired that some feeling is going on between the people of upper and backward classes for some time past. There have been some cases earlier and a report under section 107 CrPC. Nominations were filed for *Mukhia* of Gram Panchayat by Ramnaresh Dusadh on behalf of the backward-class people and Dinanath Singh, Baidyanath Singh and Akhilesh Singh from among Bhumihars who predominate. The dead was reported to be siding with upper-caste people and hence he was done to death. Accused Jagdish Mahto is reported to have enlisted the support of one Rameshwar Ahir (accused), who has recently come out of jail after serving a life sentence for murdering a constable, causing severe injury to one ASI and snatching his gun. The remaining three accused are reported to be associates of Rameshwar Ahir of the village."

[5]*The Searchlight*, 9 October 1970.

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10 September 1972
Garhani, Piro

A group of Naxalites attacked a party of armed home-guards, on deputation at Garhani dak bungalow, Piro, by exploding bombs, thereby seriously injuring three of the home-guards and snatching three. 303 rifles and 45 rounds of ammunition. This gave rise to Piro PS case no 10(9) 72 under section 395, IPC, and section 3, Explosive Substances Act, the investigation of which disclosed the involvement of Naxalite leaders of Ekwari, namely, Jagdish Mahto, Rameshwar Ahir and Ramnaresh Dusadh. One of these rifles was subsequently recovered by the police of the anti-Naxalite police camp at Neema, PS Punpun, in the district of Patna on 30 October 1973.[6]

9 December 1972
Ayar, Jagdishpur

Thana Singh, one of the most tyrannical Rajput landlords of Jagdishpur, was killed. The poor Musahar and Chamar peasants in and around the village of Ayar heard of this with relief. Many could not help but appreciate the Naxalites. An old Musahar of Barnau village of Jagdishpur block said, "If Thana Singh can be killed, probably things may change." For he had a notorious reputation and people said of him: '*Ek thana Jagdishpur, doosra thana Thana Singh*'. The word 'Naxalite' thereafter came to connote to many, a person who would resist sexual oppression with his last drop of blood. Rumours and stories of members and actions of the '*garib* party' began to circulate in the midnight conclaves of the Harijans.

Ayar had been traditionally regarded as the fortress of the Rajputs of Bhojpur; in the heart of the lowliest Musahar it is known as the village of Thana Singh. 9 December 1972, when the Naxalites killed Thana Singh, became a milestone in the history of Ayar.

In Ayar it was the Rajputs who mattered: 150 Rajput families together own two-thirds of the entire land. Dhariehan Singh, Madho Singh and Raghunath Singh own more than a

[6]RCFIC, p. 19.

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hundred bighas each, and only 30 Rajput families can be considered landless. Twenty-one Brahmin families, who constitute the next rung in the caste hierarchy, collectively hold 100 acres. Four families of Kayasthas possess 80 acres. On the other hand there are the sizable groupings of the backward castes: 112 families of Ahirs, 55 families of Kurmis along with other scheduled-caste sections of Barayis, Lohars, Kahars, etc who constitute a considerable strength.

As early as 1957 a small war was brewing between the upper and lower castes of Ayar. Under the leadership of the powerful Ahirs the backward castes organised to fight the Rajputs on the issues of *batai* (sharecropping), upper-caste tyranny, sexual violence and inequitable wages. In retaliation the 40 acres burial land, used by the Ahirs as a *charagah* (grazing ground) for their cattle, was claimed by the Rajputs in August 1957 as an *akhara* (recreation ground), in order to deprive them of the *charagah*.

Tension began to simmer in the huts and hovels of the Ahirs and other backward castes. October was fixed as the month in which the Rajputs would turn it into an *akhara*. Meetings were convened on both sides and the Rajputs ordered the backward castes to vacate the land. Jugnu Kahar, one of the leaders of the backward castes, opposed it and the conflict deepened; in support his followers quit working on the *batai* lands of the Rajputs.

By September 1957 the first shot had been fired. A police camp was posted in the village apprehending a spurt of violence Predictably, the Rajputs fired the first shot: Chaltu and Chhapri Jadhav, two cousins, were killed and some others injured. Kedar Singh, the *barhayi* of Radho Singh, the most powerful Rajput of Ayar, was speared to death by javelins while returning from the fields in the vicinity of the police camp.

The thin skin of tension and harmony remained until 1962-63. In the minds of the backward castes however the feeling of injured pride continued to fester like an old wound. There were new oppressors: Kesho Singh alias Thana Singh, began to slowly acquire in the hearts of the lower castes a name close to tyranny and naked terror.

When in 1968, another Rajput-backward caste conflict burst in Ayar, Shivratan Jadhav and Bhikhari Jadhav lost their eyes,

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when in anger Thana Singh fired upon them. The litigation that followed did not diminish the brutality of Thana Singh. Innumerable cases of rape and molestation were attributed to him.[7] Things came to such a pass that Ayar became a word of fear in the Harijans of even the distant villages. On one occasion the marriage of Dinanath Jadhav's daughter in the village became the target of Thana Singh's depredation. Ultimately the backward castes stopped giving their daughters in marriage to their kinsmen who hailed from Ayar. Many of the victims swore that one day they would avenge the deeds of Thana Singh.

Once the movement in the rice fields of Sahar began to spread into the neighbouring villages the action squads from the village of Ekwari began to scour the countryside for tyrants. In Ayar, a person called Ramayan Chamar responded to the call of Jagdish Mahto. So did his nephew Jawahar Chamar. They had enough grievances. Ramayan Chamar's anger was against the family of Hari Singh, a Rajput who behaved very much like Thana Singh.

One day when Ramayan's wife was working on the fields of Dharichan Singh, his two sons, Upendra and Nirandra, teased her and tried to seduce her, but she refused to give in to them. When he heared about it later, Ramayan Chamar protested to Dharichan Singh, the brother of Hari Singh. As a result, when he was returning from a nearby flour mill, a gang beat him up severely at the point of a gun. Ramayan never forgave them; soon after he joined the growing band of dissenters under the "Master sahab of Ekwari". Events were to follow in quick succession.

In the guerilla squad that killed Thana Singh's it is alleged that Jagdish Mahto, Ramayan Chamar and his nephew, Jawahar, were present. The villagers heard the explosion of bombs: Thana Singh, who was revelling in the company of women, was killed. None of the assailants were identified and a lot of innocent people were framed as suspects: the village *Mukhiya*, Pragar

[7]Rape cases attributed to Thana Singh: The granddaughter of Nandi Sao, Shirpunjan Sao's daughter, Raju Kaher's wife, wife of Medha Pasi, Ram Ekbal's wife, Keyed Pasi's wife, Lalan Pasi's wife, Safrudin's mother and daughter from Chandi village, a Musahar girl from Simruhan, Sahar, and the wife of Ram Singhasan Singh, etc.

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Jadhav, was only one among them. Later all were acquitted. On the other hand the kinsmen of Thana Singh suspected a fellow Rajput, Dinanath Singh, and killed him in an act of reprisal two months later. More lower-caste people were accused and most convicted for life. The blood-feud had begun.

For the squad of three a lot of scores had to be settled. The next target was Hari Singh. The next day, 10 December 1972, they pounced upon him while he was sipping tea in a shop at Behea Bazar. In the skirmish, both Jagdish Mahto and Ramayan Chamar were killed while Jawahar managed to escape; Hari Singh miraculously survived, to be killed by the extremists later.

In the inspection note written by the officer-in-charge at Behea, it was admitted that Ramayan died for an old grievance he bore Hari Singh, "It was learnt from the officer-in-charge, Jagdishpur, that Hari Singh is also an associate of the criminals and supported by the gang led by late Thana Singh of village Ayar. It was further learnt that some months back Hari Singh's nephew tried to outrage the modesty of the *Bhawah* of Ramayan Chamar of Ayar and she raised *hulla* and the male members reached there and assaulted his brother with slaps. Hari Singh was not present on that day and on his return he learnt all about it and he called Ramayan Chamar and other male members and tied them to pillars and brutally assaulted them. It was further learnt that this Ramayan Chamar of Ayar had a relation named Jawahar Chamar. Ramayan and Jawahar are members of CPI (ML) and to take revenge they invited Jagdish Mahto of Ekwari village who is reported to be a prominent member of the CPI (ML). On 9 December they all assembled at Ara Town and knew the whereabouts of Hari Singh who had also gone there for work."

Ayar no longer knew any peace.

10 December 1972
Behea Bazar, Behea

"I am Jagdish Mahto. I fight for the poor. I am a friend," he kept saying. They struck him with lathis. He tried to keep close to Ramayan Chamar, but that did not help. Ramayan Chamar died too. Jawahar Chamar, the third man, escaped to

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be killed later in the Pinjrohi mayhem. When later, the Musahar mob that took part in the orgy learned that they had killed 'Master' they did not eat for three days in grief.

After seriously injuring Hari Singh by gun-shots in the sweetmeat shop in Behea Bazar, they fled. This encounter took place at ten in the morning. Some truck drivers hearing the cries raised an alarm. They were lying in wait for some miscreants who they suspected had pilfered some of their goods. They, too, thinking the miscreants were around joined in the chase.

In the fracas that broke out members of the public also joined. Jagdish Mahto and his associates headed towards the nearby Mahtin Dai temple and crossing the Musahar quarter reached the village of Khadra. When the police cleared up the area they found two bodies; Ramayan Chamar lay in the wheat fields of Ghurlahi Ahir, and Jagdish in the plot of Biswanath Sao.

When the news reached Ekwari, Jagdish Mahto's wife, Kamleshwari Devi, broke down in sobs. Miles away in Ara Sadr Hospital the bodies of Jagdish Mahto and Ramayan Chamar lay side by side. The DI of Behea noted:

"The IO visited village Ayar and Ekwari and showed the photos of the deceased to the villagers and the rural police to fix identity of the accused persons beyond all doubt. The photos were shown to Balmiki Singh, Rajaram Singh, Banshi Singh, Ramgovind Singh, Madan Singh, Shayamlal, Ramadhar Rai, Surendar Rai, Jainandan Sharma and others, including Sudama Mahto, father of Jagdish Mahto, and his wife Kamleshwari Devi of village Ekwari. The villagers reported that one of the photos tallied or was similar to that of Jagdish Mahto of their village.

"When this photo was shown to Sudama Mahto, his eyes filled with tears and he was found restless but even then he reported that he was not able to identify the photo. Kamleshwari Devi, without bangles and *sindur* and her eyes full of tears, also showed her inability to identify the photo. The villagers reported that Kamleshwari washed her *sindur* on 12.12.72 and broke her bangles when she heared about it and when villagers informed her after P.M. examination. It was also reported that her entire family was weeping on that day after hearing the death of Jagdish Mahto.

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"Photos were also shown at village Ayar to Shri Baijanath Singh, Umashankar Singh, Rajballav Singh, Brijanandan Singh, Satrughan Singh, Arjun Singh, Rajnarain Singh (Dafadar), Ashok Kumar Singh, Jaigovind Dusadh and others and they identified one of the photos of Ramayan Chamar of their village but they did not identify the other photo. W/o Ramayan Chamar was found without bangles and *sindur*. It was also reported that she washed her *sindur* after hearing of the death of her husband in the encounter. The villagers did not identify the other photo but it was learnt in the villages that Jagdish Mahto of Ekwari had visited the house of Dinanath Ahir of Ayar village."

Recounting the life of her husband, Kamleshwari Devi, falls silent at places. "I was married to Jagdishji on 10 June 1954. I was then studying in class six. My husband was studying in the tenth standard at Ara Jain School but we only got to see each after the *gauna* ceremony was over. When I came to Ekwari on 6 December 1957, he had became an undergraduate in Patna Science College. He had done well in the matriculation examination securing 691 marks and got a sholarship of one thousand and four hundred rupees. Sometimes when he came to Ara to see his brother, who was studying in the fourth standard, he would come and see me."

She stops, and then goes back in time: "Prior to the marriage and my coming to Ekwari, Mastersahab used to study at middle school in the village. But he did not want to continue there because there were no facilities to study science in which he was interested. Further, Dinanath Singh, the Bhumihar secretary of the school, was not interested that he continue advanced studies.

"He would often remark to his father, Sudama, 'Your son is not like you. You are his father and we have been your master for so many years. He thinks that because he can read and write that it is not necessary to respect his elders. Nowadays, he does not get up from his cot in our presence. This is not right.'

"It was with great reluctance that Dinanath Singh gave him a certificate so that he could join the Ara High School. I have heard that as long as he remained in Ekwari he never played marbles or flew kites like the other children."

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She pauses, "Let me tell you one more thing. The Bhumihar Dinanath Singh was jealous that a Koeri could perform well in studies and show signs of going ahead. Even after his marriage he appeared very asocial and a loner. I never remember seeing him in the company of friends. He always preferred to be alone. His mother had died when Mastersahab was only two and a half years old and he being the only son received the unstinting affection of his father.

"Jagdishji wanted to become an engineer or government officer, but his age had been registered as more than his real age and thus he became a teacher. He completed his B.Sc. from Rajendra College, Chapra, in July 1964 and joined as a teacher in Chilki High School, Aurangabad, and since then everyone called him 'Mastersahab'. From 1965 to 1967 we stayed at Aurangabad and he was on leave during the elections of 1967.

"On 17 February 1967 he was beaten severely during the elections. He would have died but he survived miraculously. After that he became more silent as if something was eating him inside. At times he would say 'It's useless. There is no respect in this village. I am a teacher and I did not get even the treatment or *izzat* (dignity) of a human being. I will never forget this. From that day the *sindur* on your head has no meaning. You also have lost your dignity; not only I.' "

In the lamplight her eyes glow and her voice quivers but remains coherent. A long silence then; shadows move in the courtyard as she sits lost in thoughts of the past for a while.

"After the assault on my husband I would at times apply *sindur* but gave it up completely when I went underground as his comrade. Sometimes when we met he would playfully hold my hand and break my bangles and say, 'These had meaning only till 17 February 1967 but no more.'

"During those days I came to know his friends. Mastersahab would say, 'Now the whole world is my family.' He and Rameshwar Ahir came to know each other in those days. They went to court and signed a deed forfeiting all claims to the land that was their property by inheritance. He had changed from a solitary individual into a more social person. Many friends came home those days. Some were Socialists and Communists and some others belonged to the Shoshit Dal. They talked of trying to build an organisation. I wished that his dreams would come

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true, though I did not understand much."

On 14 April 1970, Ambedkar Day, the town of Ara witnessed one of the most massive demonstrations in its history. A torch-light procession which started from the village of Anait, near Ara, led by Jagdish Mahto, Rameshwar Ahir, Latafat Hussain and others converged on Ramna maidan chanting '*Harijanistan larke leinge*'; (We shall fight for Harijanistan). Large sections of backward-caste peasants and agricultural labourers had joined the demonstration. Prior to the procession, Jagdish Mahto had spent time campaigning against untouchability in the adjacent villages of Kosiar, Baruna and Inrukhi in Sahar block. In the village of Ekwari, too, the situation had begun to change.

Ekwari, sixteen miles from Ara town, was now a bustling village of 1045-1200 families of various castes containing a population of 15,000-16,542. The numerically dominant castes were Bhumihars (265 families) and Banias (110 families); the rest consisted of Musahars (105), Chamars and Dusadhs (52), Yadavs (40), Jhateras (52) and others.

Ekwari has fertile lands and the price of bigha ranges from ten to twenty thousand rupees. One bigha of land produces often 35-40 maunds of grain. Wages for labourers are the same as in most villages of Sahar: three seers of *kacchi* rice and an evening meal at harvesting, one for every twenty-one bundles of paddy harvested. The *halwaha* (ploughman) gets 10-12 *kathas* of land and 2 seer of *kachhi* rice every day. Prior to the annihilations no struggles on the issue of wages were recorded. No hartals. On the other hand the arrogance and tyranny of the Bhumihars vis-a-vis the lower castes was a most painful reality in Ekwari. Rape of lower-caste women was an accepted social evil, a fate which many bore unquestioningly.

At about this time the news of a successful agrarian revolt in Naxalbari, north Bengal, caught the imagination of Ramnaresh Dusadh, a Communist of Ekwari. Jagdish Mahto, his close friend, found it appealing too. He began to organise and train the lower-caste youths of Ekwari. Two years he spent searching for like-minded friends. This became possible when Rameshwar Ahir, a Yadhav by caste, returned to Ekwari after serving a twelve-year sentence for murder. Seeing Rameshwar, Jagdish broke down and wept like a child; "I have no *izzat* left, Rameshwar." The ex-dacoit had returned from exile, reformed. They

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became friends, and decided to dedicate their lives for social change.

Jagdish Mahto, Ramnaresh Dusadh and Rameshwar Ahir moved closer and closer in a web of growing loyalty. At about this time the Bhumihars of Ekwari severely beat up Chandrika Dushadh and Gora Chamar who they feared were becoming insolent and arrogant. Both Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir fought on their behalf and opposed this injustice; the Bhumihar women mocked: "If Gora does not have firewood for cremation, we can give him our petticoats if necessary." The Bhumihars subsequently implicated them in a case under 107 CrPC. In protest, a group of Koeris and Dusadhs of Anait along with Jagdish Mahto approached the SDO — a police post was set up in Ekwari.

Rameshwar could take it no more. He told his father who had been entreating him to give up his errant ways and look after the home, "Listen, old man, these Bhumihars will not leave me alone. They have again implicated me. But this time I am not going to jail." Soon after, both he and Jagdish Mahto signed *baksheeshnama* in court repudiating all claims to their land and wrote, "We are leaving this world as *sadhus*. We do not know whether we will live or die." Soon after Jagdish Mahto resigned from the Ara H.D. Jain School.

On 23 February 1971 the corpse of Sheopujan Singh, a 7-8 bigha landlord, was found near the south of the adjoining canal. The Harijans were excited, for Sheopujan Singh was a trusted *latheith* of the landlords and always lay in wait for Harijan women. In the past Sheopujan had raped a woman from an adjoining village, Inrukhi, near Ekwari, and snatched her ornaments too. He had also been involved in the merciless beating of Chandrika Dusadh and Gora Chamar.

On 30 March 1971 thirty-five-years-old Jagdish Singh, owning 25 acres, was murdered while returning from his fields. He was accosted by Rameshwar Ahir who entreated him, "Babu Jagdish Singh, just listen." When he drew close, Rameshwar fired. Of late, following the murder of Sheopujan Singh, Jagdish Singh had started organising the Bhumihar youth of Ekwari into resistance groups in order to counter the Naxalities and terrorise agricultural labourers away from joining their ranks. On 9 June 1971 Doodheswhar Singh was killed; he was a five-bigha

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landlord and believed to be an important member of the anti-Naxalite group formed in Ekwari. Paramhangsh Singh, another member, was killed shortly after. Munglin Singh, an associate, in June 1971. Slowly Ekwari came to be known as the 'Naxalbari of Bhojpur' and a wall of fear, suspicion and hate grew between the propertied Bhumihars and the Harijans of the village.

Since 23 February 1971 Ekwari has witnessed more than 15 killings and the Harijans are in no mood to relent. The warnings of Lalbabu Shao, the Sub-Inspector of Sahar police station, to the tyrannical Bhumihars have come true. The war that Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir unleashed has left behind deep scars of hate, under a surface calm.

Half an hour from the bus stop at Ekwari you reach the house where Jagdish Mahto lived and grew up. Kamleshwari Devi chooses to talk little. Her hair is white and her eyes sunk in. Children play around her. The times are bad, "Those who were with Mastersahab those days do not even meet me. Even when I need them and call for them they do not come. They only ask me to join the 'underground'. Mastersahab got tired of telling me that. He also used to say the same thing. I went along with him for some time but my health suffered.

"Once when I returned from Patna after a long convalescence, Mastersahab started telling me about the duties of a revolutionary. As soon as we got on to the rickshaw he said 'I want to give a dignified life to this rickshawala.' At that time, Urmila, my daughter, was very small. He would look at her and say; 'Urmila, come with me. You are my hope, my refuge. I cannot fulfil all your dreams. But I will make you a fighter. You are a tigress, Urmila, *bagh ki bacchi ho*.'

"Some time back, some government people came to me, some big officers. They said they would look after me and would I be interested in starting a weaving co-operative in Ekwari." Kamleshwari smiles weakly. Then the wrinkles in her face tighten and she stifles her tears. "I told them to leave me alone. I told them that the 'Sarkar' which had killed my husband could not help me. I am all right. I will live like this. My husband was not a criminal. He died like a *shahid*. If all this did not happen, Ekwari would still be the same. The Harijans though still weak are more conscious than before. I do feel

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alone. The Sarkar cannot bring back Mastersahab, they can only try to give me a job. I do not want it."

In the silence of the courtyard, her voice is choked with grief.

6 May 1973
Chauri, Sahar

Within this period a crucial experiment was undertaken by the Naxalites. The Ekwari murders, the emergence of Rameshwar Ahir, Ramnaresh Dusadh and others and the spread of the movement engulfed the surrounding villages of Dullamchak, Agiaon, Berath, Baruhi and Chauri. A village in Sahar block of Bhojpur, Chauri came into prominence after the police-labourer clash of 6 May 1973. Discordant voices were heard.

"*Mr Ranjit Bahadur Singh*, MLC, has appealed to the political party leaders to give full support to the administration to deal with law-and-order problems like the one created in village Chauri in Bhojpur district. . . . Mr Singh praised the administration for timely action in dealing with the explosive situation with a firm hand."[8]

"Former police minister, *Ramanand Tiwari*, Chairman of the Bihar State Socialist Party, told reporters here that the Chauri incident in the district of Bhojpur was not a Naxalite one but a struggle between the landowners and the landless for increased wages."[9]

"Socialist leader, *Karpoori Thakur*, after a Chauri visit alleged that trouble had been brewing between the agricultural labourers and the landlords over the payment of wages and allotment of land for tilling for the last one and a half years."[10]

There are 137 families in Chauri, which lies within Sahar police station at a distance of 22 miles from Arrah; the break-up: Bhumihar and Brahmin—33, Vaishya—6, Dusadh—30, Rajwar

[8]*The Indian Nation*, 11 May 1973.
[9]*Ibid.*, 9 May 1973.
[10]*Ibid.*, 11 May 1973.

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—15, Kumhar—21, Ahir—5, Koeri—10, Halwai—3, Muslim—10, Nai (barber)—1, Dhobi—1, Lohar—1, and Barahi—1.

From the economic point of view, Chauri enjoys certain advantages: it is situated in the canal belt of Bhojpur district. Thus, the agriculturists are assured of a perennial supply of water for irrigation. The soil is highly fertile and yields three crops a year; even 60 maunds of wheat can be harvested from one bigha if the new variety of seed is used. According to the 1971 census report,

—547.11 acres of cultivated land are irrigated,

—78.43 acres are unirrigated, and

—150.00 acres are not available for cultivation.

In 1971, 369 males and 77 females were literate in the village, i.e., 50 per cent and 11 per cent respectively. Most of the labourers who had been killed or implicated in cases had some educational background. Chauri has a high school as well as a primary school.

A recent survey[11] has revealed that 90 per cent of the labourers are landless. Apart from this the Bhumihars are the major landholders. The backward classes perform most of the agricultural operations during the year.

Differences relating to wages existed as early as 1968-69. In 1971-72, the major landlords made a reduction in area of the *kotha* land and the quantity of grain which the labourers were receiving, since the very beginning of 1973, landlord attitudes hardened; instead of 1 bigha of *kotha* land they began to give only 14 *kathas*; the grant of 2 *kathas* of sugarcane land was withdrawn; 1 *bojha* of *chaiti* for every 21 *bojhas* which the labourers were getting at the time of *katni* (harvesting) was stopped. 4 seers of paddy (*kacchi*) which was given at the time of *ropni* (sowing) was also stopped; 20 maunds of paddy was reduced to 10 maunds; 3 seers of paddy (*kacchi*) which used to be given during ploughing and *sattu* (nasta) was stopped. Apart from this they began to compel: (1) the landless labourers to guard the fields instead of going home at night, (2) the female members of the families of labourers to carry the harvested as well as the threshed grain from the fields to the *khalihans* and

[11]Conducted by the National Labour Institute, New Delhi, February-May 1978.

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again from the *khalihans* to the godown of the landlords for no extra remuneration.

Ultimately, when the price-rise went beyond their means and the labourers began pressing for higher wages, the landlords remained obdurate. A few days before 6 May 1973, the labourers stopped working as a result of which the harvesting of the wheat crop stopped. Ultimately, the landlords held out false assurances and persuaded them to harvest the crops.

Naxalite activities began in Sahar in 1971. Ekwari was the starting point and the villages around Ekwari like Dullamchak, Sikrahatta, Kolodehri, Berath, Bahuara and Chauri caught the wave. Events in Chauri moved fast.

Sahar by 1972 had already witnessed stray 'Naxalite' incidents; initial organisers Jagdish Mahto, Rameshwar Ahir and Ramayan Ram fanned out into the villages of Sahar spreading Naxalite ideology and undertaking actions.

Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission Report

The *Commission* records the observation of government officials who state that *Rameshwar Ahir* and Akhil Ram of Chauri were in contact with each other from before and the former had utilised the latter in organising the Harijans in Chauri. The events of May can be reviewed only against the backdrop of growing agrarian tension and politicisation of the agricultural labourers.

At the centre of all that happened was a poor peasant, Ganeshi Dusadh. Ganeshi was born the son of a bonded landless peasant. His father died due to lack of medical care. Ganeshi began to work at the landlords' in order to repay the debt. Slowly but inevitably he became restive about social and economic oppression in the village. The *sadhus* offered him temporary relief, but failed to satisfy him. At about the same time Bhojpur saw the emergence of Naxalism and Ganeshi was drawn to its ideology. By about October 1972, he had formed a small *dasta* (*foco*) and began annhilations of landlords by 29 November 1972. A Krantikari Committee, too, was formed.

29-30 November 1972: Ramnath Rai, a notorious Mahajan and a 15-bigha landlord, was killed.

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7 April 1973: Awadh Rai was allegedly assaulted by Naxalites at his *khalihan* (granary).

8 April 1973: Swaroop Rai assaulted.

9 April 1973: The field of Muni Nath Rai was confiscated and a red banner planted on it. Muni Nath Rai was an Ekwari landlord who had some land in Chauri. The inscription on the flag read:

"*Duniya ke garibon ek ho, sahas ke sath sangharsh karo aur sahas ke saath vijay prapt karo !*
Adhyaksha Mao Tse-tung zindabad! Naxalbari zindabad!
Shaheed Comrade Charu Mazumdar zindabad!
Comrade Ramayan aur Jagdish Prasad zindabad!
Ekwari ke mashoor samant soodkhor goonda Muni Nath ka char bigha zamin krantikari sarkar ke taraf se zapt!
Rajya satta bandook ke nali se hoti hai!
Naxalbari zindabad! Adhyaksh Mao zindabad!"

(Workers of the world unite. Fight and achieve victory with courage. Long Live Chairman Mao. Long Live Naxalbari, Long Live Martyr Comrade Charu Mazumdar. Long Live Martyr Comrade Ramayan and Jagdish Prasad. The revolutionary government has seized four bighas of the notorious landlord and moneylender Muni Nath of Ekwari. Power flows from the barrel of a gun, Long Live Naxalbari. Long Live Chairman Mao.)

9-10 April 1973: In the night of 9-10 April 1973, Karu Rai, an 8-10 bigha landlord, brother of Swaroop Rai, was brutally murdered while he was sleeping in the *khalihan* and his stock of wheat, 60 maunds, was looted and distributed. After the assault on Ramroop Rai, an old man of eighty, Karu Rai, his brother, went to the Dusadhtoli and admonished the Dusadhs. A trail of wheat led up to the house of Khaderah Dusadh. The party organiser, *Lal Jhanda* described it as intentional; it was left in order to lure the police who would arrive after the incident. That is precisely what happened. An investigating constable was attacked; he escaped narrowly.

Mid-April 1973: Regarding Muni Rai's land, Ganeshi Dusadh's Krantikari Committee after a dialogue with the people arrived at a consensus. One day near about mid-April

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they ploughed and sowed the field. Landlord's wives watched the proceedings from their terraces. The Krantikari Committee's action increased the confidence of the people. It also acquired an autonomous legal status within the village. People began to bring cases to its court. One day, a poor peasant complained to the Committee that his rich-peasant employer had abused him. It was decided that the Committee would send a *dasta* to bring the accused person and then the poor peasant would hit him four blows as punishment. On hearing this the rich peasant fled and absconded from the village.

26 April 1973: The climax was reached when on this day, a group of traders of Baidrabad, PS Arwal, Gaya district, came and purchased 40 maunds of rice from Ram Singhasan Rai. The Krantikari Committee had issued a directive stating that the stock/grains of the landlords are the property of the kisans and any sale transactions would be done through the Committee. Alternately no trader can buy the "landlords" grain; in case he does, it will be confiscated. Harassed by this directive the Chauri landlords invited an outside trader. Ganeshi conveyed the decision of the Committee to the trader and asked him to leave the rice behind. Nothwithstanding, he began to leave, at which they confiscated the grain and handed it over the Committee. The bullocks were returned to the trader. A case was registered as Sahar PS, case no. 9 (4) 73 under section 143-144 and 379 IPC. On 1 May 1973 it was converted into a case under section 395 IPC. On 5 May the DSP K.P. Singh directed the investigating officer to take immediate steps to arrest 14 accused persons. The DSP further ordered that the police force attached to the crime centre at Harpur Lock, about three miles from Chauri, should be transferred to Chauri itself.

27 April 1973: Sidhnath Rai applied for a gun licence, recommended by Rajdeo Ram, MLA of Sahar Reserved Constituency. He recommended another for Ramdhani Sharma stating that Chauri was completely disturbed by Naxalite activities.

1 May 1973: Agricultural labourers of Chauri paraded the village shouting Naxalite slogans.

4 May 1973: Top Naxalite leader, Rameshwar Ahir, visited Chauri for organising the local Harijans against the cultivators.

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5 May 1973: At the monthly crime meeting at the office of the SP, Ara, an anonymous petition addressed by "Ek Bhaybhit Gramin" (A terrorised villager) to the DM Bhojpur was forwarded to the SP for consideration. In the petition reference was made to the reign of terror that had been prevailing in Chauri on account of the murders and lootings and it was further stated that for fear of the Naxalites the villagers had to sleep inside their houses leaving their fields, *khalihans* and *dalnas* (buildings) and they could not go to the canal or sell their stock of rice for the purposes of paying rents and meeting domestic needs. 7 out of the 11 names listed as offenders were also common to the grain-looting case that had been registered earlier.

6 May 1973: At the behest of the SP, who had ordered that warrants be issued and subsequent arrests be made the following day, under the execution of the inspector of Piro circle, a a police party reached Chauri at about 6 a.m. on 6 May 1973. Two villagers, Siaram Rai and Girja Nandan Sharma, were asked to remain witnessess to the search. Hardly had Sri Nagendra Singh, OC, Sahar, along with some constables entered the house of Khaderah Dusadh, 50-60 persons attacked them with brick-bats shouting "Assault the police. Naxalbari zindabad." The police party, fearing that they would be surrounded, retreated to the canal and waited for reinforcements. In the meantime the inspector enlisted the co-operation of Jagnarain Singh, Sarpanch of Bahuara, and Suraj Singh of Kolodihri to mediate in order that the 14 persons accused in the grain-looting case might surrender peacefully. But the attempt failed; the labourers informed them that on no account would they allow arrests, searches and attachment of properties. Reinforcements arrived at 10.45 headed by 2 DSPs and several officers and men. Another attempt at a peaceful settlement failed when the police entered the village they were attacked. The fight ended at 1-1.30 p.m. Lalmohar Dusadh died on the spot, Ganeshi Dusadh on the way to hospital and Balkeswar Dusadh and Dinanath Teli at Ara hospital on the same day. No women or children were injured. The police fired 19 rounds. Sahar PS case no. 3(5)73 was instituted against 47 persons and 36 were taken into custody. On the side of the police, 19 persons received injuries. One platoon of the BMP was posted in

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Chauri.[12]

Chauri today—about 900 out of the total 1100 bighas of land in Chauri remain in the hands of Bhumihar landlords; in response to the fluctuating moods of restive agricultural labour, landlords have brought tractors in order to remove dependence; plough taboo has disintegrated.

After the *kand* (outrage), the institution of *banihari* has collasped. Today, only casual labour is employed. Many labourers of Chauri work in surrounding villages. But the violence and counter-violence has left deep scars of suspicion and restrained anger. Time and again, the Bhumihars warn restive labourers, "Gurpa yaad rakhna."[13]

Apart from this, the vicious web of litigation and frame-ups still persists. There are 16-20 licensed guns in the hands of landlords today; in 1973, there were only three. In the atmosphere of fear and distrust, all debts remain unpaid since 1973. Simultaneously, loans are rarely forthcoming in times of distress. About the Naxalites, the peasants say: "*Naxalite log siddhant ki larai larh rahe hain*" (The Naxalites are fighting a struggle for issues).

January 1974
Dehri, Sahar

Hardwar Singh, a 39-bigha-landowner, a 45-year-old, semi-literate, was murdered while returning from the Sahar bazar in December 1973. His body was left untouched, as were the gold ring on his finger, the gold chain around his neck, the Rs. 100 and other items in his pocket. The people said such a 'clean' killing could only be done by the Naxalities.

A 25-bigha-landlord, Tapeswar Singh was killed while resting in his *khalihan* in January 1974; a person called Hira Singh was injured. An unsuccessful attempt to dynamite the house of Bali Singh, a literate rich peasant, was made too, in Dehri village.

[12]*The Indian Nation* 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 17 May 1973.

[13]Gurpa, a village in Sahar, was the scene of a Harijan carnage on 11 March 1977. Their huts were set on fire in which many persons including a pregnant woman were burnt. It was an organised landlord action in retaliation to an assault on five landlords on 11 August 1976.

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4-5 January 1974
Lalganj, Jagdishpur

It appears from the evidence of Rajballabh Singh, a sepoy attached to the home guards, that in January 1974 nine home guards had been deputed to Lalganj along with a havaldar in connection with the realisation of canal dues. Each of the sepoys had been provided with a musket rifle. In the evening of 5 January 1974, two sepoys, Rajballabh Singh and Kumta Chaubey, were on sentry duty in front of the Tehsil camp at about 7 p.m.

On that evening, a gang of 10 or 12 persons were seen advancing in the direction of the camp office. 8 musket rifles of the sepoys were lying stored in the verandah where the two sepoys were on sentry duty, rifle in hand. As they saw the gang advancing Rajballabh Singh challenged them and asked them to halt. They said that they were going to attend to the call of nature and that they were local people. Rajballabh Singh then allowed them to go. After proceeding a little ahead, the members of the gang threw three or four bombs at the camp verandah. Rajballabh Singh was hurt in the back. On account of the explosion it became all dark though it was a moonlit night. In spite of the darkness both the sentries fired one round each. After that Rajballabh Singh fell down. The members of the gang raised slogans of 'Naxalite Zindabad!' and entered the camp office. Later Rajballabh Singh discovered that four musket rifles were missing. Thereupon the sepoys chased the intruders for about 100 yards. Three of the jawans fired from their rifles but there was no response; they had all run away.

The thana at Jagdishpur was at a distance of 8 or 9 miles and there at about 4 a.m. on 6 January 1974 Rajballabh Singh lodged the FIR giving rise to Jagdishpur PS case no 4(1)74, u/s 395, IPC and Sections 3 and 5 of the Explosives Substances Act. In the course of investigation it was learnt that two or four days prior to the Lalganj occurrence a secret meeting was held by Satya Narain singh and other Naxalite leaders in village Barhara, about one mile to the South of Lalganj. Two of the muskets which were stolen from the custody of the home guards at Lalganj were subsequently recovered from a *tola* of village

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Berath within Sahar PS.[14]

20 January 1974
Pawana,, Sandesh

Ever since the headless corpse of the Rajput Bhuwan Singh was found on this day, the village of Pawana has remained disturbed. The lower castes say that Bhuwan Singh made trips to the Chamartoli for their women. The strength of the movement subsequently waned; it was years later, in 1979, that Pawana began to be rocked by violence again.

The death of Parsuram Singh, 50, a Mahto by caste, came almost suddenly. An educated man, holding a B.Com. degree, Parsuram was formerly a CPI worker. Being the secretary of the local co-operative society and a teacher in the local high school, the fifteen-bigha Parsuram was known to be fond of the Naxalites. Later he fell out with them, desiring to take over himself the leadership of the Harijans and creating a Mahto supremacy. On 30 October 1979, Parsuram was killed while returning from the high school; it is alleged that Sheo Singh and Jagoo Singh, prominent Rajputs of Pawana, were behind his murder.

Tension between the upper and lower castes began to grow over the scarcity of water and irrigation facilities. The assault on Bhusan Mahto, Govind Halwai, Jamuna Halwai and Raghunath Paneri after their quarrel with Jagoo Singh over water, only widened the rift. In protest, the backward castes set the bus of Rajwant Singh and Arjun Singh, Rajputs, on fire on 3 September 1979. A few days later they looted the rice bags of a visiting trader, distributing it to the poorer sections of Pawana. The hand of Naxalism was clear.

The Rajputs of Pawana were no longer sure that their unity with some of the Mahto and Ahir households would guarantee permanent peace. On 31 October, they asked for police protection. But the death toll did not cease. On 12 November Shankerdayal Singh, 32, a Rajput wood contractor, was attacked and killed in his premises, north of the village. Despite the police

[14]RCFIC, p. 117.

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camp, slogans of "Naxalbari Zindabad" continue to be shouted throughout the night.

March 1974
Ahile, Sahar

The headless body of Jamuna Singh, a 30-bigha-landlord of Karath village in Tarari block, was found in a well in Ahile. The people alleged that he was involved with a woman from the house of Dhodha Mahto.

4-5 March 1974
Sonatola, Sahar

150 personnel of CRP (Central Reserve Police), BMP (Bihar Military Police) along with the SP, DM, ADM, 2 DSPs etc., surrounded the village of Sonatola following the murder of Jhulan Singh, a Rajput landlord of the contiguous Berath village. Described by the police as a "fortress-type" village, Sonatola became the target of a two-day-long offensive launched by the police and the landlords of Berath. By 15 March, the authorities claimed that about 46 underground Naxalites from Sonatola had surrendered either before the police or the SDOs court during the massive police operation. Among the arms seized, two of the rifles were identified as those looted from police custody at Lalganj, Jagdishpur on 5 January 1974.[15]

14 March 1974
Chilhoas, Sandesh

Seven policemen were injured when some forty Naxalites swooped down on an armed police party in Chilhoas village in Sandesh thana of Bhojpur district, snatching three rifles and twenty cartridges. The Naxalites were armed with handgrenades and other lethal weapons. The injured policemen were admitted to Ara Sadar hospital and the condition of three was critical.

[15] *Ibid.*

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21 March 1974
Kesath, Nawanagar

Naxalites attacked a police camp. In the attack three policemen were injured and one rifle was snatched.

May 1974
Phoolari, Sandesh

Situated on the banks of the Sone, the village of Phoolari, according to the police, is Naxalite-infested. The shifting waters of the river as in other parts of Bhojpur have always made the *diara* lands the bone of contention between the backward castes and the Bhumihars of Phoolari. When land surfaced ahead of the Bhumihar land on the *diara*, struggles between them and the Ahirs, Kanos, Mahars and Lohars, normally ensued. By the time things came to the boil, extremist successes in the nearby block of Sahar had instilled in the backward castes a sense of confidence and courage. Unrest began to brew in Phoolari over a plot of 380 acres that had surfaced after the muddy-black waters of the Sone had receded. Much to the surprise of the Bhumihars the backward castes who tilled the lands seized it and promptly district officials were called in to intervene.

The atmosphere began to get heated after Surendra Singh was found beheaded in his *khalihan* by May 1974. Events began to follow in quick succession. The way to terrorise the lower castes was time-worn in the villages of Bhojpur: litigation. Ram Ekbal Sharma had been claiming a plot which was illegally occupied by Bular Singh. To further harass him Bular Singh implicated him and his brother Ghunur Lohar in a cow-stealing incident under Sandesh Case 5(a)74, 457/380. Among the accusers was Surjan Singh, a Bhumihar *daroga*, and S.P. Sharma, a Bhumihar lawyer, who took the side of his casteman Bular Singh. Though the Harijans sided with the two brothers summons were served on them. The conflict deepened.

By the end of 1974 violent incidents began to rock Phoolari. On 10 January 1975 Bilas Kano was killed by a gang of about 50 Bhumihars while tilling the contested land, and many others were injured. Landless and illiterate, 35-year-old Bilas Kano left behind two sons and a daughter. Amongst the thirteen who

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were accused were Naresh Singh, Amar Singh, Chandrika Singh, Ramkhayal Singh and Raghunath Singh. They were all acquitted subsequently.

Dinanath Singh, Bhumihar, lodged a counter-case the next day, on 11 January—a case of theft, Sandesh 5(1)75, accusing Baban Mahto and Srinivas Chamar of theft. In another case registered by Kameswar Singh thirteen persons were framed from the other side—among whom were Palati Chamar, Arjun Mahto, Srinivas Chamar, Chandrika and others.

The placid Phoolari began to be associated with the names of Radhika Devi alias Kalpatia and Ravan Chamar, both of whom were later killed in encounters with the police. Violence and counter-violence were to follow in the atmosphere of litigation that soon had enveloped the village. On 12 May 1975 a 27-year-old kisan, Shivadhar Singh, was assaulted but survived despite serious injuries. Once again Arjun Mahto and Srinivas Mahto were implicated; both belonged to the family of Naresh Mahto, an important backward-caste leader. They were absolutely innocent and had no hand in the incident.

But actions were to follow. On 13 July 1975 the extremists surprised Satyanarain alias Gandhi Singh while he was returning from the village of Bijatoili and killed him. There were no witnesses to his murder but in the FIR lodged by Butan Singh, Ramsuhawan Lohar, son of the IAF personnel Ram Ekbal Sharma, Naresh Mahto and his two sons, Arjun and Srinivas, along with Bharatlal Sonar were implicated. The decrepit infirm Ramsuhawan could have had no hand in the incident. This was just an attempt by the Bhumihars of Phoolari to get rid of the articulate men.

16 June 1974
Sandesh

Ramadhar Choube, an influential landlord, had usurped all government allotted lands and thus enraged the Harijans, who filed petitions. He was also known to have killed Muslims in a Hindu-Muslim clash. At 7.30 p.m. he was killed—the first Naxalite incident in Sandesh. The Sandesh thana case 7(6)74 302 framed Ramashis Gupta.

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June 1974
Pande

The Brahmin-held village of Pande, where all the Brahmin families own more than a hundred bighas of land, was also rocked by extremist action. In June 1974 thirty-five-year-old Bansidhar Pande was lured to the south of the village. It was alleged that he had illegal relations with the wife of Radha Musahar; further the 45-bigha landlord was in the company of hated thieves. Under the mahua tree a group of unidentified assailants put an end to his life.

June 1974
Bansidehri, Sahar

When outsiders enter Bansidehri, the people are suspicious. Since the murder of Dasa Rai in June 1974 an uneasy silence hangs over the entire village. Described by his upper-caste kinsmen as well-mannered, the 30-40-bigha landlord was in the eyes of the Harijans an incorrigible rapist. Unmarried, he kept a *jatu* woman as his *rakhel* or concubine and the women of the lower castes working in field or orchard grew nervous under his roving lecherous eyes. One day in June at about 11.30 a.m. he was killed by unknown assailants with hatchets and daggers. In Bansidehri a war had been declared.

One month later, in July, 25 yards from the spot of his murder Ramanuj Rai was killed at about the same time. The 20-year-old, 40-45-bigha-owning landlord, was known as a good wrestler in the area. To the lower castes he was nothing more than a goonda, involved in dacoities and thefts. After his body with the throat slit was recovered from the canal land an FIR was lodged. Gopal Pathak, from whom the police claimed to have retrieved a blood-stained *dhoti*, was arrested.

On 21 August 1974 a third murder in Bansidehri was recorded. Rajendra Rai's mother told the police that she had last seen her 32-year-old son when he set out for Nawadah village. When he did not return by the evening she grew worried. It later transpired that the corpse of the bearded celibate son was found in the adjoining Sone river. It is alleged that he was beaten to death. According to the Harijans the 150-bigha-owning Rajendra

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Rai was no *sadhu*; in fact he was the father of two sons and not a ganja-smoking ascetic as his Bhumihar castemen described him. According to some, his body was never recovered.

In the case that followed there were 12 accused: Mandip Dusadh, Ramdip Dusadh, Chandip Dusadh, Lakhaptia Musahar, Nihora Kano, Badal Dusadh, Devraj Dusadh and Sanatan Dusadh. While the Bhumihars described the killing as a Naxalite murder, the Harijans alleged that Rajendra Rai was a police agent and had got some peasants arrested in Aurangabad, Gaya.

For the next three years Bansidehri remained comparatively quiet, until the first week of April 1977. While picking Mahua flowers in the orchard the ageing Narayan Rai was assaulted and done to death by sharp weapons. In the FIR 3(4)77 the four who were accused were Daroga Dusadh, Ramuna Dusadh, Mandip Dusadh and Ramdip Dusadh. Though there was no evidence, the four served terms of detention.

23 July 1974
Pandedehi, Piro

A Brahmin of the village was murdered under mysterious circumstances. It is rumoured that he lusted for a Harijan woman. He was lured to a rendezvous on the information that she would be waiting for him. Naxalites pounced on him there. Ayodhya Sharma who was implicated under the Piro thana case 26(3)74 was subsequently released by the Janata regime.

17 August 1974
Baruhi, Sahar

When a posse of police led by a DSP surrounded the village of Baruhi they were looking for Shyamlal Mahto. According to their information, Shyamlal had been providing shelter and training for Naxalites at his house. For the past one month, Baruhi on the banks of the Sone, had witnessed violent events. The killing of the 24-year-old Rashbehari Singh, a Bhumihar, towards the end of July had climaxed the growing conflict between the Bhumihars and Musahars.

The dominant upper-caste community are 45 families of

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Bhumihars; Koeris (70), Ahirs (15), Musahars (60) and other backward and scheduled castes complete the caste profile. The Musahars once lived at the head of the village but the Bhumihars, who considered them to be untouchables, harassed them. Irritated and disgruntled, after a time the Musahars quit the land and bought a sandy stretch of *diara* land from a Bhumihar Gopaldas, son of Krishna Nand Das, and began to settle again. The 1,000-tree orchard of guava and jackfruit which was a part of the land also passed into their ownership. However, the Bhumihars would fell trees in the orchard at will.

Rashbehari Singh had a 7 bigha plot in the orchard. Following his death, suspicion fell on the Musahars. Ramchandra Chamar in fear fled to the nearby village of Baghis and was subsequently arrested after the police surrounded Ekwari. Thereafter no one disputed the ownership of the Musahars over the lands bordering the Sone. Bhavnath Rai's 70 bighas of *diara* land along with Srikant Rai's 12 bighas—both disputed—went over to them.

Almost twenty days later the police cordoned Baruhi. Panic spread in the Musahar and Dusadh quarters. They arrested Shyamlal. While others were being arrested and interrogated, Muni Pasi escaped into the orchard. His father-in-law Dukhit Pasi loved him for his good manners. Though fifty-four years old he was fleetfooted. The police ran after him and fired. When they finally found Muni Pasi he was lying spread-eagled near Gulab Sadhu's hut—dead.

24 August 1974
Bhojpur

The state government requisitioned four companies of CRP for Bhojpur.

13 October 1974
Patna

The All India Sarva Seva Sangh decided to launch a movement under the guidance of Jayaprakash Narayan to check the growing Naxalite menace.

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19 December 1974
Sahar, Sahar

Two policemen and one Naxalite were killed and a *havildar* seriously injured near south Sahar block office, 30 km from Ara, in a commando-type attack by the Naxalites on night police guards. The sources said,[16] the extremists, 20 in number, had cut off the power supply to the block, plunging the whole area into darkness. Armed with guns they swooped on the block guards and opened indiscriminate fire. Taken aback, the policemen, however, returned the fire killing one of the attackers on the spot. In the encounter, the *havildar* succeeded in snatching the rifle of a Naxalite while another attacker managed to snatch away the rifle of a policeman. The body of Daroga Chamar, the Naxalite, has been kept under strict security for identification.

The 300-hut village is largely populated by Muslims and Harijans. A ten-year-old Harijan boy had been beaten up by a wealthy flour-mill-owner Raj Karan Rai. His father not being at home, the boy had gone to grind flour and inadvertently left the shop without having it weighed. The severe beating left him in a critical condition. He survived only because he was shifted by his mother to the Ara hospital. The incident embittered the Harijans of Sahar.

A few days later at around 7.30 p.m. an armed mob of nearly 300 persons looted a cloth-shop belonging to Raj Karan Rai. Between the attackers and the police an hour-long crossfire ensued. A section of the attackers while fleeing were fired upon near the village hospital. Two Harijans were injured and allegedly died in the hospital. The doctor later boasted that he had killed the 'two Naxalites'. Subsequently when he heard that certain people were making inquiries about the direction from where the firing came that day, he changed his opinion and said that it was from the direction of the irrigation office. Two years later in 1976 he his wife were shot and beheaded.

[16]*The Indian Nation*, 21 December 1974.

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December 1974
Barnaun, Jagdishpur

Naxalites attacked the house and property of the Rajput landlord Shatrajit Singh, who owned more than 150 bighas of land. Apart from being an avowed 'class enemy', Shatrajit Singh was close to the police. Miraculously he escaped, but his henchman, a Nat by caste, despite entreaties by the Naxalites rose to his master's defence and was killed.

Later in May 1975, members of this landlord's family, Mahesh Singh, Parshuram Singh and Ram Pravesh Singh, survived despite severe injuries after being attacked in the *khalihan*. It was reported that Mahesh Singh had illicit relations with the wife of his Yadav *banihar* who assisted the Naxalites in this attack. Further, Mahesh Singh was a source of terror and harassment to the lower-caste labourers of the village. In retaliation the Rajputs launched an attack on the poor peasants. Many went *faraar* and joined the ranks of the Naxalites subsequently.

10 January 1975
Madhopur, Sahar

The upper castes of Madhopur never considered Chandrama Singh, the son of the landless Rajput Jagannath Singh, as one of them. During his marriage a lot of social eyebrows were raised. After all, unlike the other Rajputs, his father was a poor ill-paid performer in a dancing troupe. Finding a job for himself proved difficult for Chandrama, as he was illiterate. Finally through one Devanandan Singh of Bargaon village he went to Dhanbad to earn a living. After some months Chandrama gave up his job and returned to the village.

In Madhopur, he soon became an active participant in the struggles and agitations of the agricultural labourers. In an incident in the village, Nandkishore Pande was killed inadvertently by the peasants instead of Shivpujan Pande, a sworn enemy of the labourers. A number of cases were immediately filed against Chandrama who was now considered to be one of the important leaders of the Naxalite movement in the district. He was implicated with Avas Mian of Madhopur for theft, framed for the murder of one Jagdish Tewari and held responsible for the

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looting and theft of Rajaram Pande's crops.

But for the peasants Chandrama had become a leader. In the process of this mobilisation he had earned the hatred of Gopal Singh of Bajreya village. In 1974 when Chandrama had gone to collect three seers of rice, Gopal Singh had given him three seers of barley instead. Smitten by this arrogance Chandrama quit working on his fields and began to organise the peasants of Madhopur. He was apprehended for the second time at the house of the widow of Lalmuni Kuar. This time under pressure Chandrama became a police informer.

This act of his proved fatal. It is alleged that the life of Chamku Musahar was time and again imperilled by the information that Chandrama passed on to the police. Rumours say that he had a hand in the arrest of Rameshwar Ahir and Dr Nirmal, too. On 10 January 1975 while he was returning from his sister's place he was killed by the Naxalites at Bargaon, Narhidihi. On his corpse there was a terse note: "This is the reward of all traitors."

14 January 1975
Sonatola, Sahar

For Rameshwar Ahir the road to Sonatola had been unusually long and death did not surprise him. When the Harijans from Beroth formed 'Sonatola', Rameshwar wanted it to be called 'Vietnam'. That January the fields around Sonatola were yellow with mustard. A few kilometres away, the police had stopped at Chandi and not finding Rameshwar turned their jeeps in the direction of Sonatola. The Harijans of the village loved him and had placed a plate of curds and beaten rice in front of him. It was the day of Makar Sankranti. For them, Rameshwar Ahir, was not an outlaw, but *Sadhuji*.

Son of a poor peasant of Ekwari, Rameshwar grew up as a hard-swearing, reckless Ahir youth. The Bhumihar landlords of the village resented the insolent attitude of Doman Ahir's son. They said, "Doman, your son walks with his head erect. He does not even bow his head in our presence." Rameshwar's mother had died early and his father was unable to control his unruly spirit. Doman sent him to the school in Ekwari but Rameshwar did not like studies and left after the seventh standard.

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That he would grow up to hate the Bhumihars was clear even in his childhood. There was a small theft in the school. The blame was put on Rameshwar in accordance with the predominant saying, "If there is a theft, catch the Ahir." He was reprimanded and beaten, and his Bhumihar-fearing father coughed up a small fine. At home also he was beaten severely. Later on Rameshwar always referred to his father as 'spineless'.

But being a good student he won the affection of Damodar Singh, his teacher. There he learned to play the harmonium. Slowly Rameshwar drifted into the dance troupe run by Dinanath Mahapatra. He had a full-throated, gifted voice and a brilliant histrionic talent that held his audience in thrall. Shortly after, he ran away from home and took up a job at Diladarnagar, Uttar Pradesh. When his father finally located him, the merchant turned him over and gave him thirty rupees for remuneration. On the train while returning home, they found out that the notes were counterfeit.

Back at Ekwari, Rameshwar still remained truculent and restless. Looking after the fields or tending to the bullocks held no interest for him. He believed in himself; he always said: "Make your own road. Do not follow anyone's footsteps. People will follow you." He dropped out of Dinanath's troupe as his father grew intolerant of his lackadaisical ways. The Bhumihars also took offence when he began to strut about the village in a *lungi*, heedless of upper-caste elders. At last Ramgulam Singh of nearby Baruna village recruited Rameshwar to his gang of desperadoes.

With Rameshwar's entry into the underworld, a new phase opened up in his life. Over the years he travelled on dacoit missions into West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. The police were on the look out for him and his reputation as a cruel outlaw spread far and wide. When he finally gave up his ways he tried to bring his underworld comrades to the road of social change. Around 1955-56 he was apprehended. While being led away he lunged at the guards near the culvert of Dhamnia; in the ensuing fracas he killed a constable and seriously injured an ASI, snatched a rifle and fled. The police raided his father's house and confiscated almost all his property. It was ultimately his father who handed him over to the law. In 1960 after prolonged litigation the Additional Sessions Judge Biswanath Prasad sentenced

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him to life imprisonment.

That Rameshwar was a different sort of dacoit was obvious from the story he often later recounted. Once, he was being transferred to Daltonganj jail. The passengers sitting around were curious when they heard that the heavily-guarded man was a 'lifer' dacoit. One man said, "Some dacoits are not violent and often have a good character. They are only interested in valuables and respect the status of women. Once a dacoit despite the provocations of his friends did not touch my wife. He even let the ornaments on her body remain." The dacoit he was talking about was none other than Rameshwar Ahir, the heavily-guarded lifer in the train.

During his jail tenure he did not curb his violent temper, and the warders would often put him in solitary confinement. Time and again he was shifted from jail to jail: Ara, Buxar, Bhagalpur, Daltonganj. It was in jail that the blustering dacoit underwent a profound change. One day, while he was contemplating suicide, the jailer came up to him and urged, "Rameshwar, you must read something," and gave him the *Gita*. Rameshwar later recounted that he read it with growing interest and fascination for over six months. Every time he read it new thoughts would come to his mind. He did not cease to marvel how such a book could exist in this world. "I was reluctant to return the book. The next book that I read was Swami Dayanand's *Satyartha Prakash* and his *Rig Vedadi Bhasha Bhumika*." His father remembers his son asking for two hundred rupees to procure communist literature.

The crowd that had gathered around a bearded man in the court premises at Ara did not recognise in the *Sadhuji* they were listening to spellbound Rameshwar Ahir, the former notorious dacoit. When he reached Ekwari, a villager told his father that he had seen Rameshwar sitting in a nearby sugarcane field, reluctant to come home. The village chawkidar, Jagdish Ahir, could not recognise the bearded man who asked him to carry, a load of books, until he said, "I'm Rameshwar, do you not recognise me?"

The father was surprised when his son asked him for some money to travel and meet friends instead of desiring to stay at home. Jagdish Mahto and Rameshwar Ahir were to be seen more often. Together, on Ambedkar Day in 1970, Rameshwar

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addressed crowds at Ramna Maidan, Ara, warning: "Beware of the disciples of Gandhi . . . the only way is armed struggle." People began to say that the dacoit now wanted to atone and his talk of communism was just a facade.

When Ramgulam, his dacoit leader, heard that Rameshwar had returned from jail he rushed to see him, and said, "Rameshwar, let us form a strong gang again." Rameshwar snapped, "No Ramgulam, I want to form a strong party. As in Vietnam." Ramgulam began to laugh and jeeringly retorted, "There are many like you, Rameshwar. You are not indispensable." Rameshwar had quit his past and later confided the secret reasons that had spurred him to join Ramgulam, "I wanted to be like Ramgulam because the Bhumihars in my village were scared of him. Every time Ramgulam walked around Ekwari in his striped *lungi*, the Bhumihars would shudder."

That Rameshwar and Jagdish were planning something immediate and violent came to light after a series of annihilations rocked the otherwise placid Ekwari. When his son, Behari Yadav, was implicated in the murder of Jagdish Singh, the second annihilation, Rameshwar told him on one of his secret visits home, "Behari, the greatest protector of a son is his father. Come under my flag, I will save you." But when Nathuram, an old communist, asked him if he could join because he had weapons. Rameshwar replied, "That does not mean, you are a communist." Affectionately called 'Marx and Engels'; Jagdish and Rameshwar rose to become important leaders of the extremist movement.

Wounded in the arm after the raid in Chilhoas in March 1974 and suffering from stomach ailments, Rameshwar was worn and tired when the police stopped near the canal and getting down from the jeeps were running through the mustard fields towards Sonatola. The encirclement at Chandi had failed and reports convinced J.N. Srivastava the SP that Rameshwar would be in Sonatola, three kilometres away from Karnol Chandi.

Crossing the culvert at Dhamnia the vehicles stopped abruptly at Sonatola. The villagers were not alarmed because they were used to combing operations, but what struck them was the fact that groups of police, with fixed bayonets, were running towards the village. Some youths asked Rameshwar to

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run but he declined, he complained of tiredness and went to a hut five hundred yards away and lay down in the hay. Some women working in the fields said when interrogated that they had seen a man run towards the hut. The police picked up the *lungi*-wearing, bare-bodied man and brought him to the village.

When they began to inquire about the person, the villagers vouched that the man was innocent. At that time, Rameshwar was staying with the mother of Sukhram Chamar, who was still in jail. She had been feeding and sheltering *Sadhuji* over the last few days. She broke down in sobs while narrating the arrest of Rameshwar. Sukhram's wife even claimed that he was her husband and told the police that he worked in Assam and had come down for his holidays. But that did not help.

While all this was going on, Rameshwar kept an unbroken silence. Minutes later he took off his watch and handed it to the woman. From the jeep he gazed at the surrounding fields. It was the day of Makar Sankrant. A few minutes ago Sukhram's mother had offered him curds and chura. The land was yellow with mustard flowers. His hands were in manacles, and the rope bit into his stomach. He was tired and weak. But the fever in his mind continued to burn. All at once the culvert near Dhamnia came closer and everything appeared uncannily familiar.

More than a decade had passed since they had taken him away over this culvert. At that time, he was in chains, too. But today he was not a criminal. A violent anger gripped him. And he ordered the driver to stop. The jeep slowed down. A scuffle broke out and the constables resisted. But he stepped down and refused to move and ordered the officer to shoot him.

While they tried to get him into the jeep he kept resisting. He was a powerfully built man. He kept saying, "I am not a criminal. Shoot me, but I won't surrender. I won't go to jail. I am not a dacoit. I fight for the oppressed. I defend the honour of women. One day, this land will belong to those who till it. Even though you kill me, it will not prevent this happening. I have left behind many like me. Yes, I am Rameshwar, for whom you are searching."

The officer ordered him to get in. In anger Rameshwar swung out with his handcuffed hands. In turn, the officer fired

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twice.[17] Rameshwar slumped to the ground, a thin trickle of blood ran down his eyes. At Dhamnia, close to the culvert, his journey came to an end.

The next night, on the parched arid banks of Gangi Ghat, Ara, an old man, spent and shivering in the chilly wind, watched the flames sputter around his son's corpse. In the morning there were no ashes left. An old *sadhu* said that some constables took them away and smeared their foreheads with it while leaving.

A plaintive song wafted across the long dusty roads to Sahar and throats, choked with grief, lent their voices;

We cannot express our grief.
Baruhi, Baruna, Baghi are
Crying in sorrow.
Berath weeps with lowered head.
All are weeping.
We cannot express our grief.

That night Ekwari's landlords, sang the *Ramayana* in relief.

Among the youths who began to flee when the police were approaching Sonatola was the thirty-year-old Amawas Dusadh. He broke off from the others and entered the nearby hamlet of Kasap and hid in a stack of hay. But in the melee some villagers spotted him and, terrorised by the police, they pointed out the lad to them. He was taken away to the police camp at Garhani where he was interrogated. Amawas remained silent even when the police, unable to extract any information from him, kept prodding him with their bayonets. Being innocent but silent, the police became more convinced that he was a Naxalite, they finally shot him at eight in the evening.

Amawas left behind four children, all below the age of eight. Hearing of her son's death, his old mother went to the SP, J.N. Srivastava. He put ninety rupees into her hand and smiled weakly. Amawas's father is still in jail custody as a suspect in the murder of Thulan Singh in March 1974. He has no money for bail. Amawas's old mother sits huddled in a corner in Sonatola, she tells her grandchildren: "Don't ever forget those men in khaki who beat your father to death."

[17] *Aryavarta*, 20 January 1975.

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January 1975
Sahar

Who killed Chamku Musahar? The press reported on 22 May 1975, soon after peasant-police skirmishes broke out in Masaurhi, Patna, that the state administration was closely following activities of the pro-Charu anti-Lin Piao group which had been operating in Patna and Bhojpur districts of south Bihar. In particular, they were in search of 'Jawahar' Subroto Dutt alias Kalika, Bhagwan Prasad of Berath, Sahar, Ram Naresh Dusadh, Narayan Kavi, Dr Nirmal and Chamku Musahar. It claimed that Chamku escaped from a police encounter in March last, probably hinting at the Sonatola Operation on 4-5 March 1974.

Chamku Musahar hailed from Karbasin village in Sahar, and studied in Bargaon High School up to standard ten, while working as a cowherd for Ramayan Singh at Godiha village for two years. Around the villages, Chamku came to be known as a reckless, strong Musahar happy in the company of dancing troupes. His association with Rameshwar Ahir moved him closer to the extremists. But subsequently, he became non-grata in the party. Reports go on to say that Chamku was expelled from the party on the charge of being an informer and finally killed around January 1975.

February 1975
Saraiya, Sandesh

The year 1975 marked the beginning of a new phase in Bhojpur. Dacoits and thieves began to diminish in the areas affected by extremist attacks on oppressors of all kinds. Kapil Teli, a notorious dacoit of Saraiya, was annihilated in February 1975. He had become a terror in the area and was said to have killed three members of his kin in the past. He was also known to be a sexual reprobate. Further, the landlords in the area entrusted Kapil Teli with the task of organising counter-Naxalite groups, and were believed to have given him ten thousand rupees for this purpose. In February 1975, when the Naxalites killed him they threw his corpse in a well.

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March 1975
Dhhancchuan, Sahar

Outrageous incidents afflicted the village of Dhhancchuan like many others in Sahar block. Kamla, the daughter of a small peasant called Shivpujan Pandi, was a teacher at the village primary school. One day while she was returning in the evening a Bhumihar, Vishwanath Singh, made a pass at her. Subsequently a panchayat was called at the house of Dr Kamla Sharma.

It was the murder of Kulsekhar Rai, an owner of 50-55 bighas of land, that put the village among the troubled hamlets in Sahar. At about 1.30 p.m. on 14 March 1975 he was killed by extremists while tilling his land. His *halwaha*, Baban Dhobi, ran away in fear. But the case 7(3)75 that was registered implicated Suraj Bania, a military man from the village of Chak who was in Dhhancchuan on leave, and Kesho Chamar from Bahuara village. After three and a half years in detention, Kesho was finally acquitted and released in 1978.

3 April 1975
Chaparapur, Piro

Following the attack on a police post at Kowath, Dawat, and the snatching of five rifles, posses of policemen began to comb the surrounding areas in search of the Naxalites. Pursuing them for three days the police on a tip-off surrounded the village of Chapra in Piro block. On 3 April 1975 in the nightlong siege, both sides exchanged fire. The police kept on urging the hiding Naxalites to surrender. The villagers who were witnesses to the twelve-hour ordeal remember the reluctance of the extremists to surrender.

When they finally did, the SP who was in charge of the operation ordered them to position themselves on the roof of a hut with rifles in their hand. The police photographer clicked. All of a sudden they were cut down in a hail of bullets. The surrender had turned into a massacre. One of the wounded, Algu Ram, was propped up in a chair, his sides dripping blood. While Algu was collasping, the SP walked up to him and asked, "Brave Algu, what can I do for you and your family?" Algu replied,

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"Nothing. Let me die fighting, they will look after themselves." He left behind his wife, a grandmother and two children. J.N. Srivastava then turned to a group of policemen around him and said, "You cowards, what are you doing gawking at a hero die. Come on, now let's go."

Algu's brother, Shivnarayan, also died in the 'mercy-killing'. Both belonged to Chapra village and were landless labourers.

Dusadh by caste, Algu became an extremist, like many others, after a history of crime. One day he turned round and killed his own employer, Biswanath Singh, who was also a partner in Algu's dacoity spoils. After his release in March 1975 Algu went *faraar* until he met his death in Chapra. The other two who died were Lalmohar, aged twenty-five, and Rajinand Ram alias Viswanath. Viswanath, twenty-five years old, was an ordinary Chamar *banihar* and hailed from Shahpur village in Dumri thana. He had become a Naxalite after killing his tyrannical master. Rumours and popular legend have it that Lalmohur who belonged to the village of Diliya, PS Dawath, cropped his long hair prior to his surrender in order to dupe the police into believing that they, the extremists, were deceptively fashionable at times.

14-15 April 1975
Dullamchak, Sahar

When Gati Rai, 25, owner of 60 bighas of land, was murdered in May 1975 there were grim premonitions that the village of Dullamchak would slowly turn into a battleground. The contiguous villages of Chauri, Bahuara and Berath had already gone under the wave of extremism and it was only a matter of time before the orchard-fringed Dullamchak, three miles from Ekwari, would follow suit.

Most of the land in the village belonged to the Bhumihars who constitute 35 households out of the total number of 350. Each of them possessed no less than 25-30 bighas. Notably Adhar Rai and Shivdas Rai owned 100 and 75 bighas respectively. The rest of the castes owned insignificant patches. Among the 45 Ahir households, Baijnath Singh and Laldhari Singh are prominent, owning 20 and 12 bighas respectively.

For long the Bhumihars had dominated in Dullamchak. Kapil

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Rai and Kamla Rai of the contiguous Dhhancchuan village along with Rajnath Singh of Dullamchak constituted an omnipotent Bhumihar triumvirate under whose reign the Harijans lived in daily terror. Even the police took orders from Rajnath Singh. At his behest they assaulted Basawan Jadhav who had incurred his wrath. In the Kulshekhar Rai murder case in Dhhancchuan they arrested the innocent Suraj Bania in deference to the whims and fancies of Rajnath Singh. The Ahirs too simmered with resentment under the Bhumihars.

Ahir-Bhumihar tension came to a head when a young Ahir lad Chandrama Jadhav was seriously assaulted for plucking mangoes from the orchard of Ramji Rai. It brought to the surface the underlying hatred between the two castes. Chandrama's father had in-laws in the nearby Naxalite village of Bahuara and Ram Pravesh Kahar, a friend of Chandrama's was a known Naxalite sympathiser. A raw nerve had been struck.

Shortly after came the murder of Gati Rai. Consequently the police moved in and camped at the house of Rajnath Rai. On 3 March an extremist-police encounter took place at Dullamchak and tension began to increase. Finally, on the night of 21 May, at about 8 p.m. a Naxalite squad ambushed a police party of 3 armed CRP jawans, one CRP inspector and an SI while it was proceeding to its post in the village. The tyres of the jeep were deflated by bullet shots and heavy fire opened up from both sides. A constable, Biswanath, belonging to Dumraon, was killed and the SI, B.B. Lal, was seriously injured. Forces from Ekwari were called and a siege continued through the night.

The next morning when the flushing-out began under the supervision of Rajnath Rai, pandenonium broke loose. Ram Pravesh Kahar broke the encirclement but was finally intercepted by the police while fleeing and shot near Dhhancchuan by Inspector Dube. Rasul Mian, Jivan Kahar, Jhagaru Ram, Bijili Kahar and Chandra Bania were beaten and arrested. Some others escaped arrest. Rajnath Rai used the label 'Naxalite' to settle scores with all dissidents and potential rebels.

The Dullamchak events sparked interest and concern and Jayaprakash Narayan asked two of his trusted lieutenants, Ram Ekbal and Baburao Chandawar, to report about the incident. The press statement of Baburao Chandawar brought to light the fact that apart from the police, landlords were taking the

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law into their own hands in order to contain the unrest.

Baburao Chandawar, the Sarvodaya leader protested: "The report of the encounter is false. The fact is on 13 May police were posted in Dullamchak village in view of the clash between the two landlords, Ramnath Rai and Rajnath Rai. On the morning of 15 May Bacchan Ahir, a poor peasant of village Admuan, went to Dr Kamla Rai of Dullamchak. The doctor called him a Naxalite and before many eye-witnesses shot him dead. Bacchan Ahir died on the spot. In the night the CRP men posted in the village dragged out a landless peasant Gopal Chamar and killed him."

For the time being peace was restored in the village. Three Harijans were dead. The landlords heaved a sigh of relief. Rampravesh Kahar had organised labourers to demand equitable wages a year ago and the Bhumihars were happy to be rid of him.

9 April 1975
Ayar, Jagdishpur

Hari Singh, the terror of Ayar, had escaped death miraculously when Jagdish Mahto and Ramayan Ram had attacked him at Behea Bazar on 10 December 1972. Thereafter he always remained wary and rarely strayed from his village. On 9 April 1975 at about 10 a.m. Hari Singh, at the request of Jiwandhan Sao, a teacher, was going to Barnau in connection with electricity supply. Jiwandhan was also with him along with some other men from Ayar. Hari Singh was armed with his loaded double-barrelled (DBBL) gun. They were accosted by some known persons. One of them stepped out and asked Hari Singh if he could spare some tabacco. As soon as he responded, one of them dragged him down by his hair while another struck at his head with a sword. The other man grabbed his rifle and they disappeared without much ado. Thunderstruck, Hari Singh's kinsmen looked on helplessly. One more debauchee and tyrant had fallen. Like the earlier killing of Thana Singh the Harijans, who had always lived in fear, again felt relieved.

But more was to follow. Dinanath Sao, who had been accompanying Hari Singh, refused to be a witness despite the fact that a case was lodged by the members of Hari Singh's

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family listing the suspects Bhodil Musahar, Sundar Musahar, Lalan Pasi, Guleshwar Ram, Rambishun Chamar and Baleshwar Ram. Apart from Guleshwar, who is still in jail, all the others immediately absconded and, it is believed, joined the underground.

Reprisals followed. Dinanath Sao was killed on 31 December 1978 by the anti-Naxalities led by Jiwandhan Sao. As an outcome of the case Baleshwar Ram was sentenced to life imprisonment and the judge held the Naxalities squarely responsible for the murder of Hari Singh.

In the judgement report K.N. Jaiswal recorded, "The prosecution case is that Hari Singh, son of Dharichan Singh of village Ayar, was a target of intended assassination by extremists known as Naxalities who are votaries of violence, in pursuance he was attacked at Behea Bazar. Since then Hari Singh carried a weapon."

May 1975
Chandi, Piro

That Rameshwar Ahir was hounded out from a village as remote as Sonatola and subsequently killed, left behind grief as well as a certain sense of suspicion about the precise manner in which the operation had taken place on 14 January 1975. The comrades eventually located the man who had been apparently paid a thousand rupees for the job. One night, Bishnudev Dusadh did not return after attending to some people who had called on him—the death of an informer.

2 June 1975
Hadiabad, Jagdishpur

The landlords of Hadiabad went on a rampage in the Harijantola. Armed to the teeth and with support from neighbouring villages they set to the torch many a Harijan hut. Suresh Koeri, 13-year-old son of Narayan Koeri from the village of Semraon, was hacked to pieces and his body thrown into the fire. Twenty-five houses bore the brunt of the landlord outrage. It is believed that this was in response to the growth of Naxalism in the village and part of the general offensive against its spread.

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4 June 1975
Bhojpur, Patna

The state government set up a 15-member Social Injustice Eradication Committee whose first task was to tour the Naxalite-affected areas of Bhojpur and Patna districts with a view to creating goodwill and restoring confidence among all sections of society.

13 June 1975
Sahar, Bhojpur

At a crowded meeting held in a mango-grove in Narayanpur village, the Sarvodaya leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, on a two-day tour of the Naxalite areas of Bhojpur district, asked the people who had adopted the path of violence to give it up and work for 'Total Revolution'. He is believed to have said, "Give me five years and if this non-violent Total Revolution fails, I will not come back to Bhojpur and ask you to give up Naxalism."

During this intensive tour of the affected areas which had recently witnessed a series of bloody clashes between the police, alleged Naxalities, landlords and the landless, he held separate discussions with the landlords and landless and appealed to them to maintain peace in the area. In the interior areas like Narayanpur and Tarari, where suspected Naxalites had been active for some time, the Sarvodaya leader also addressed public meetings.

Visiting the bereaved members of the family of Rampravesh Kahar and Rambachan Ahir in Dullamchak he offered consolation and reprimanded the tyrannical *mukhiya*, Rajnath Rai. He refused to drink water on seeing that the police were posted at his house. Rumours go that after Jayaprakash Narayan left a quip made the rounds of the Sahar countryside, "When the monsoons arrive, the frogs begin to croak."

23 June 1975
Pianian, Sahar

The DIG of Police (Central Range) B.N. Sinha told the press that one section of armed police, five in number, while coming to Ara with a loan collection party from Narayanpur

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village under Sahar PS was ambushed. As soon as the party headed by R.N. Pandey, magistrate, reached Pianian on the Ara-Sasaram road his jeep was attacked from the nearby *arahar* fields, where the extremists were hiding and firing at the jeep. Initially taken by surprise, the armed policemen soon returned the fire and an exchange continued for some time. Ultimately, the extremists retreated and fled. According to the policemen about 10 persons in the extremist group were carrying rifles. Pianian is about four miles from Ara and the Sahar belt of extremists starts from near this village. The incident took place at about 5.15 p.m. and the police started combing operations soon after. About 10 persons were detained by the police for interrogation.

29 June — 2 July 1975
Bahuara, Sahar

When our jeep stopped at Bahuara the villagers did not scatter. Eyes and legs followed us: Who are you? What do you want? Where are you from? When we asked, "Tell us about the three-day encounter," the people exchanged glances. Then a fourteen-year old youth cleared his throat and said, "Go, ask that from the people. They will know better. Bahuara, everyone knows about Bahuara. You did not have to come here to know about the encounter. Even the BBC reported it, apart from all the papers." Then he fell silent, and finally advised, " Don't ever come on a jeep to Bahuara. We mistake it for the police."

From the road skirting the canal, the small village of Bahuara appears tucked away, and people travelling down the road could easily overlook the mud-thatched hamlets below. Consisting of 143 households, Bahuara is dominated numerically by the Ahirs who constitute 60 families. The upper-caste has a small representation as is evident from the fact that there are only 5 households of Rajputs. As in other villages around Bahuara, wages were the same, but no social opposition was visible and no resentment recorded.

On a tip-off a large contingent of forces, primarily CRP and Jat regiment personnel, surrounded the village on the evening of

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28 June. They were assisted by approximately three hundred heavily armed Bhumihars from the contiguous villages of Dhancchuan, Dullamchak and Chauri. The years 1974-75 were marked with increasing instances of landlord-police actions against restive Harijan sections.

After a prolonged exchange of fire, the police threw teargas shells in order to 'smoke' out the hiding extemists. This went on for almost three days. Having failed, the police set Harijan huts on fire. In this way the huts of Kesho Chamar, Rajgrihi, Banjhu Ram, Sarju Ram, Jogan Dusadh, Badri Dusadh and Mahesh Dusadh were reduced to ash and cinders.

In the long 96-hour battle, the police suffered severe casualties; rumours have it that a rift developed between the police and paramilitary during the siege. It was alleged that lower-caste personnel were being selected by upper-caste officers to gut the Harijan huts and be on the frontlines. This subsequently generated resentment and led to cross-fighting. Among the incredible number of paramilitary casualties, one hundered and twenty-three were alleged to have been killed due to intra-group conflict.

On Wednesday morning, 2 July, when Harijan huts were blazing, four men were seen emerging from the smoke, shouting Naxalite slogans. Dr Nirmal and Narayan Kavi were among them. Two others fell to a shower of bullets. Ultimately, when contigents of tired paramilitary personnel, local and foreign journalists searched the debris, three corpses, bottles of blood for transfusion and Naxalite literature were found. About 12 to 14 houses were found inter-connected by tunnels.

The carnage was heavy, but the SP Y.N. Srivastava was assuring the press in Patna that Bahuara was under control. However, he admitted that 400-500 rounds of ammunition and 30 handgrenades had been spent. The DM said that two CRP jawans had died, five were seriously injured. Samant Singh, a DSP who less than four weeks ago had massacred eleven out of fifteen arrested Naxalite suspects in Ghorauhuan village in Masaurhi PS of Patna district, was also killed.

It is believed that the search-and-destroy operation could have been more diabolic had not the word 'Harijan' become a sacred during the Emergency. An officer quipped to a visiting journalist, "Had it not been for the *hulla* that would be raised,

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we would have gutted the whole village, *ujaar dethe.*" Among the eight suspects who were rounded up were Chaptiram, Kesho Ram and Radha Musahar, 20, of Baghi village, who had been earlier arrested during the Sonatola Operation. Biswanath Chamar, the secretary of the CPI(ML) village committee, Ramanand Pasi, Sarju Teli and Butan Musahar were killed.

But Butan did not die at Bahuara. Wounded in the leg he limped along on the road to Panwari. A splinter sent flames of fire and pain through his limbs. On foot, the dusty, strip of road in that torrid June seemed long and unending. Master Butan. The boy who came from Baruna village—intelligent, probably the first Musahar to complete his matriculation in the entire district. No job for years. Then employment in a private biscuit factory. Years of wandering in search of employment in Calcutta. Back in Baruna, his Musahar kinsmen lived in abject squalor, in fear. Butan taught them to read and write. Affectionately, they called him Butan 'Master'.

When he had come home on a holiday he had found that life for the poor Musahars had become intolerable. They lived in total fear of Ramgulam Singh and his two brothers, Dharikshan and Sitaram. Visarjan Musahar told him about Ramgulam's lecherous eye when he crossed the Musahartoli on his way to Subhagiya, the Musahar woman who was his *rakhel* (concubine). Ramgulam flattered her with gifts. Subhagiya's two sisters were even more beautiful than her. They too did not escape Ramgulam's insatiable lust. His two brothers Dharikshan and Sitaram also increased their visits to the Musahar quarters. When Butan heard all this he became violently angry.

Around this time, a group of Musahars who resented the ways of Ramgulam and had been influenced by the teachings of Rameshwar Ahir caught hold of Ramgulam one day and thrashed him severely. It came as a rude shock. Subsequently, Ramgulam went to the nearest *thana* and implicated eleven Musahars. Most of them were old and infirm. Butan's ageing father, Dhora, and his own brothers, Baleshwar, and Nageshwar, were also implicated. The law suit became a curse on the entire Musahar community of Baruna. When Butan heard all this and his father broke down and wept, he could no longer contain himself.

In his own village, Chamku Musahar, his kinsmen said, had

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joined the Naxalites and gone *faraar*. Butan met Chamku and was surprised that the Chamku he had known had changed. He talked of *badla* (revenge) and a society in which there would be no place for tyrants like Ramgulam and Musahars would walk with their heads high and not crouch in fear. In some villeges the Musahars were no longer docile and scared, he said.

One day a squad led by Butan killed Ramgulam in broad daylight, and along with Chamku, he vanished. Stories began to circulate that Butan Master had left his job in Calcutta and joined the Naxalites.

When posses of the Jat regiment were 'smoking' the huts in the early morning of 2 July at Bahuara, Butan had managed to slink away. He was wounded in the leg and his sides ached with fatigue. Throwing his rifle, he began to limp to the next village of Panwari. The Musahars hid him, but on a tip-off the police raided Panwari. At the time of his death, the police officer asked him, "Who are you?"

He replied, "I am Butan Musahar, commander of the Red Army in Bhojpur, what else do you want to know?" Tearing his shirt open he pointed to his chest and cried, "If you want to know more, fire here. Then only you can know the depth of my heart." A shot. Twenty-four-year-old Butan Musahar, affectionately called 'Master', slumped to the ground. The ordeal of Bahuara had ended. The Musahars wept. From Bahuara, the district headquarters of Ara was only an hour's journey away.

Our driver pointed to Panwari and said, "That is the village where they killed Butan. He was a Musahar, but he died like a hero." The jeep lurched forward and Bahuara appeared like a speck gradually disappearing in dust and the June summer heat.

July 1975
Ramasaar, Sandesh

Bhupnath Pathak was not the real target of the extremists that day. A member of his family, Ghura Pande, was the real object. Known in the village for his loose and rapacious ways

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with the lower-caste women; the people in particular were angry about his immoral relationship with the daughter of Baijnath Ram. That day while he was returning with Bhupnath Pathak from his fields at about 8 p.m. they were fired upon. While Ghura Pande was slightly injured and finally managed to escape, Bhupnath was inadvertently seized and beheaded.

The police raided the village after the incident and recovered grenades, bombs and lethal arms from the house of fifteen-year-old Ghura Dusadh, whom they arrested. He admitted that Mathura Ram, Ramanand Dusadh, Liaqat Ali and Ghura Ram were involved in the incident; they were subsequently implicated under the Arms Act and Ghura Dusadh came out on bail after more than two yeais in jail.

But Ramasaar was still to quieten. In August 1977 when news came that the police were to raid the village again, Ravan Chamar and four other Naxalites lay in wait for them in the sugarcane fields. As soon as they approached they attacked Syambehari Singh, an Ahir *daroga*, with grenades. But they did not explode; in the fracas two were killed. Ravan Chamar is also believed to have been killed in this encounter in July 1975.

Resentment and a consciousness of their plight grew in the village of Ramasaar. In January 1977 there was another attack but the victim survived with injuries; it is said that he had not paid equitable wages to Dusadhs.

March 1975
Mudfarpur, Sahar

The end of the tyrant Kesarilal came in due course. After graduating from Baghi High School he soon became a *piada* to the owner of the Gaziapur estate, and secured a large acreage of land. He was said to have about three hundred acres scattered in different parts of the *thana* of Sahar. He personally tended the 300 acres he owned near the village of Dallia.

Thirtp-five year-old Kesarilal was known for his cruel treatment of labourers and it is alleged that he got some landless labourers convicted in various *fauzdari* cases. According to others he became a victim of the ongoing conflict between Aash Rai and Kamla Rai. The actual reasons behind his death remain shroud-

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ed in mystery.

On the day of Holi the gifted Kesarilal began to sing in his deep-throated voice, "*Tirbenia mei Ram nehaye, Suraj uday ke beria*". (Ram is bathing in the Triveni river, at sunrise.) Suddenly the silence of the night was torn by the sound of exploding bombs. Kesarilal was dead, though no one then imagined that Mudfarpur had any remote connection with extremists.

August 1975
Pasaur, Piro

In the Musahar dominated 450-family village of Pasaur all was not quiet. The Rajputs were powerful and prosperous though the Musahars could claim that Dwarika was the first Musahar *mukhiya* in the district of Bhojpur. When Ramkripal Singh of the adjacent village of Lilari was killed in August 1975 no one even surmised that the contiguous Pasaur would also rock with killings.

Ramkripal Singh was an influential lawyer as well as a rich landlord. He had also usurped some land that the government had set aside for the Harijans. Moreover he was a member of an anti-Naxalite committee. Slowly significant events began to occur in Pasaur. Sadhu Singh, an alleged Naxalite sympathiser, was severely assulted. The next incident of violence that was recorded was years later. On 10 February 1978 a group of extremists fired upon *dafadar* Jagnarain Singh; he and Srinath Jadhav were injured in the rain of bullets. No one was accused.

10 July 1975
Bhojpur

The number of villages strongly held by the Naxalites *thana*-wise was given in a statement prepared by the District Police Superintendent on 10 July 1975: Sahar—39, Sandesh—29, Piro—23, Tarari—15, Jagdishpur—6, Nawanagar—6, Udwantnagar—6, Brahmpur—5. "Such mapping could only be technically correct," the SP said, "for 80 per cent of the landless peasants of the district are sympathisers or activists of the Naxalite movement."

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20 August 1975
Icchri, Jagdishpur

When asked about Naxalism the landed Ahirs of Icchri fall silent. Then they point to the Harijan quarters of the village and say: "The Naxalites are there. They do not want land or better wages. They want political power. *Rajsatta.* The Harijan women of Icchri do not lurk behind the mud walls, shy of strangers. One of them says. 'Yes, we are all Naxalites, if by that you mean someone who will fight and not take *zulum* lying down'."

Barnau and Hadiabad, the villages around Icchri, were seething with tension. In turn, Icchri also saw the emergence of Naxalism. On 17 August 1972 the notorious Rajput landlord Ramlochan Singh was attacked in broad daylight by a group of extremists, while irrigating his fields. He escaped death. When in 1975, the village of Jagdishpur was exploding with growing violence, the police cordoned off Icchri in the early hours of 20 August. In a short encounter, the police party was attacked with bombs. But the bombs and grenades failed to explode. The SP and his forces temporarily retreated. In the lull the Naxalites escaped. Two hours later, after the arrival of reinforcement, they arrested eight Harijans including Ram Bishun Chamar. During the round-up the police found Harijan huts to be interconnected with tunnels, as in Bahuara.

29 November 1975
Babubandh, Sahar

The police are still camped at Babubandh. As you walk through the slush of the wheat fields towards the village, the olive-green forces, perched on a rooftop, are visible from far. Sakaldip Chamar's brother is lame. He limps and squats awkwardly. The police officer turns to you and says. "Have a look at him. His brother is 'underground.' He is one of the most wanted leaders in Bhojpur today. There is a heavy reward on his head. Sakaldip Chamar escaped after the *kand* in the village. We are still looking for him." He is referring to the events of 29 November 1975.

When two heavily armed policemen were hovering around

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Sakaldip in the wheat field that day he kept entreating them not to harass him. In the meantime the sound of shots came from the village and pandemonium broke loose. The placid calm of Babubandh was shattered. In the courtyard of Sakaldip Chamar's house an encounter had broken out.

Sakaldip was known as a man in trouble. The widow of his cousin, Shital, had gone to court and sued him and his family, claiming possession over a four-and-half bigha plot of land. Thus he had become the centre of long-drawn enmity between Rajeshwar Singh, a government employee, and the shrewd Naresh Singh. Naresh Singh, an influential 79-bigha Rajput landlord, had a long-standing dispute with Rajeshwar Singh over the possession of the plot of land belonging to Shital Chamar's widow. In order to settle scores, Naresh befriended Sakaldip and his family and began to incite them against his rival.

Sakaldip was a deserter from the Army Medical Corps and had stayed on in the village tilling his plot of ten-twelve bighas. His ownership over the land was tenuous. Rajeshwar Singh had acquired the rights over it by deceiving Shital Chamar's widow into handing over possession. The case was on, and Sakaldip kept making harrowing visits to the court.

At the same time Sakaldip came in touch with Naxalites. Gradually his house became a rendezvous for them. Rajeshwar Singh, who had been in the police before, became aware of these developments, and informed the local *thana* that the men that moved around Sakaldip Chamar and Naresh Singh were in league with Naxalites.

On 29 November, a section of police led by Waris Khan stopped at Babubandh on a routine reconnaissance. They were looking for Sakaldip. Of late, the police had been receiving information from Rajeshwar Singh about Sakaldip's suspicious activities. To add to it, he had been a deserter from the Army and they thought it would be proper to check him up. When they accosted Sakaldip, he was tending to his wheat crop. When Waris Khan started needling him about his affairs, Sakaldip turned aggressive. At which, Waris Khan deputed two constables to hold him and then proceeded to raid his house.

As soon as Waris Khan stepped into the house, the women started shrilly clamouring that there had been a birth in the

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house and forbade the police to enter. But one of them suspecting that something was awry, barged in. Immediately all hell broke loose.

The courtyard began to ricochet with bullets: some unidentified men attacked the police party with axes and choppers: panic and confusion gripped the village. Dasai Singh, a retired jail police personnel, was injured in the leg. Rajeshwar Singh died on the spot. A few animals tied in the courtyard were injured. In anger and rage, the police killed Chandradip, the ailing brother of Sakaldip, why was lying on a *charpoy*. Dr Nirmal and Mangal alias Rajendra Yadav were among the extremists killed. Subroto (Jawahar) Dutt, secretary of the CPI(ML), escaped only to die of wounds later. The Musahars carried his body through the wheat fields. The police never got hold of it.

In the meantime, Sakaldip, hearing the sound of gun shots, sensed what had happened. He immediately lunged at one of the constables and shoving him aside grabbed a rifle from the other and fled. From that day, Sakaldip joined the Naxalites and went *faraar*.

The news of Babubandh was received with excitement among police circles. The death of Dr Nirmal had come all of a sudden and to the police the Babubandh killings seemed like a windfall. Jawahar Dutt and Mangal were equally prominent and had been on the 'wanted list' for long. After breaking through the Bahuara encirclement only four months earlier, twenty-seven-year-old Dr Nirmal met his death on 29 November 1975.

Nirmal Kumar was born on 1 January 1948. His father Mukul Singh Mahto, was a small Koeri peasant of Barora village in Sandesh block. A railway employee, he managed to send Nirmal to school. Nirmal matriculated in 1965 from Garhani. Piro, in the first division. All along he had lived in comparative economic prosperity. But Nirmal was a Koeri by caste, a section considered inferior by the upper-castes like the Rajputs and Bhumihars. While in school, Nirmal got involved in a clash with some upper-caste youths. This feeling of being inferior continued to recur during Nirmal's life. After completing his B.Sc. from the H.D. Jain college, Ara, Nirmal moved to the

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Patna Science College, to do his master's degree in 1968.

Soft-spoken, quiet Nirmal by then had decided to dedicate his life to the people by becoming a doctor. In Patna, he was attracted to communism. Subsequently, he competed and secured admission in a medical college at Laheriasarai, Darbhanga. Here again the upper-caste youths harassed him. He was a Koeri, it did not matter if he was brilliant. Nirmal began to organise a group of leftist students with others like Arabind Bose and Dilip Gupta.

Upper-caste domination was so acutely repressive in the college that Nirmal was beaten up, time and again. Along with fifty other students he had submitted a petition to Kedar Pande, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, regarding upper-caste tyranny in the campus. But nothing came of it. The growth of Naxalism in Bhojpur and Nirmal's association with Jagdish Mahto, began to make him more and more frustrated and restless.

One day, three Bhumihar toughs of the college, Birda Singh, Kailash Singh and Bipin Singh, attacked Nirmal, Arabind Bose and Dilip Gupta with javelins and choppers. They retaliated with bombs and Nirmal was severely injured. He was admitted to hospital and showed blatant indifference when the DIG came over and expressed concern. A case was registered and Nirmal secured bail after remaining fifteen days in detention.

Nirmal came out an almost broken man. It became impossible for him to move around freely in the college and Bhumihar toughs kept taunting him whenever possible. Then all of a sudden in a last act of vendetta Nirmal and his friends gatecrashed into a gambling session in the hotel where the toughs were present. They attacked them with grenades, killing three and wounding a few. That night Nirmal vanished. Legend has it that he was not alone. Beside him was Rameshwar Ahir, who is believed to have masterminded the operation.

Nirmal became a Naxalite. The awkwardly dressed medical student dedicated his life to the lowest orders. He told his parents when they requested him to marry: "I will marry only when the poorest Musaharin is not raped. Not till then." The villagers called him 'Doctor'. When JP visited Bhojpur he is believed to have conferred with Nirmal, persuading him to give up violence, but he refused. On 29 November it all came to an end. But by that time the shy, diffident Sakaldip had

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decided to continue the work of the Doctor.

But the tension in Babubandh did not subside. Most of the land was in the hands of nine Rajput families. Among the backward castes, only two had large holdings—Randip Bhagat, a Gaderi by caste, and Yamuna Yadav, an Ahir, who owned 25 and 30 bighas respectively. Tension grew speadily. An armed group of Naxalites raided the village and mounted an assault on the Rajput landlords, wounding many. They burnt the stacked grain in the *khalihan* to cinders and ash. Terrified, the landlords fled to the village of Berath. Only during the day would they venture to return to oversee their lands in Babubandh.

On 13 March 1976 Nanku Singh, a Rajput landlord of Babubandh, was kidnapped and annihilated by the Naxalites. Most of the people who were implicated in this action were innocent. Many of them were released on bail. But the landlords were trying to reorganise. The police camp which had been posted at the village after the incident of 29 November 1975 did not prove a deterrent.

The landlords were biding their time. On 13 July 1976 Mandip Bhagat, a seventy-year-old man, who was a constant source of courage to the Harijans, was murdered in broad daylight while working on his fields. The police refused to take any notice of this, though they were camping in the village. The authorities were notified of this incident by grief-stricken Harijans in the area. They also complained of police connivance.

Since December 1975 the police had been camping in the village like a virtual army of occupation. They had cut down trees for firewood, valued at more than a lakh of rupees. They took what they wanted at will: fresh vegetables and chickens belonging to Harijans and Rs 100 from Shivdhari Yadav. They had assaulted with lathis the wife of Shivdhari Yadav and on more than one occasion the wives of Chandip and Sakaldip Chamar. They beat the wives of Bachan Dusadh, Raghubir Dusadh and Sakadeep until their saris were in shreds. In the November incident, they shot a buffalo belonging to Rambachan Dusadh. The women of Babubandh were taught a

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lesson. When Chandip's widow collected flour at great cost to perform his *shradh*, the police just threw all the material away.

The SP S.N. Lal Gupta, responded by saying that the Rajputs were not at 'fault; they merely wanted to exorcise a fear because Mandip Bhagat was believed to be befriending and sheltering local Naxalites. There could be no question of confiscation of weapons from the Rajputs because the area was disturbed. However, Mandip Bhagat was known in the area as an old follower of nonviolence and often said, "If any Naxalite enters the village, they will first have to kill me before they lay their hands on the Rajputs."

Babubandh no longer knows any peace. The police camp remains. Mandip Bhagat's death has brought the Harijans closer to the Naxalites. The persecuted and harassed Sakaldip Chamar is still at large. The police point to his lame brother, whom they interrogate regularly and say, "Look at this lame man. He is not all that innocent as he looks. We are looking for his brother. We are looking for him." That is why the police kept quiet about Mandip Bhagat's death, they had a hunch that Sakaldip often came home at nights to see his old mother and Mandip Bhagat sheltered him.

31 December 1975
Pinjrohi, Sandeshi

The police cracked down in on Pinjrohi in the early hours of the morning. On a tip-off they cordoned off the Harijan quarters and began to hustle the inhabitants out of their huts. All the males were herded together and led away to a nearby orchard. When Ramdayal Chamar protested, he was shot dead. Two of his sons who got panicky and began to run for safety were picked off like rabbits. Then they broke into his hut and finished off the rest: two women, Bhulkumari and Kalpatia, and Jawahar Chamar. Another woman, Radhika, was seriously injured. Described as an encounter the police bagged six corpses and made many arrests.

In fact, Pinjrohi was a complete massacre. Harijans were becoming cheaper as 'Operation Thunder' promised an unbridled season of Harijan blood. Like his uncle, Ramayan Chamar, who became the first martyr along with Jagdish Mahto on 12

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December 1972, Jawahar's life came to a bloody end. He had escaped from Behea when a violent mob was pursuing his uncle and Jagdish Mahto.

Studious and intelligent, Jawahar completed his matriculation from the Ayar High School and did his B.Sc. from the H.D. Jain College, Ara. In fact, his father thought that young Jawahar would bring material success to the family. But that was not to be. When Hari Singh attempted to rape his aunt, the idealist Jawahar was violently enraged. He quit studies and joined the group around Jagdish Mahto. After escaping from Behea he was arrested along with Nathu Ram, but subsequently released. At Pinjrohi, his bullet-ridden corpse concluded a story of protest and sacrifice.

1 January 1976
Agiaon, Piro

The police got a lift in Baleshwar Jadhav's jeep. When it stopped at Agiaon, Naxalites attacked the vehicle with bombs. Though the police escaped, Baleshwar was severely injured.

31 March 1976
Hanuman-Chapra, Piro

In the child's mouth, the words of his father sound unusually plaintive:

One day all die. No one remains,
In the service of the people, death achieves a dignity
Like friends Ganeshi, Ramayan, Butan became martyrs
Like Master, Jawahar, Sadhuji, *Ratan and Nirmal in turn were great.*
Red salute to hundred martyrs who died in service of the people
Their death is heavier than the mountains, inspiring in the enemy fear.

Narayan Koeri, the singer-Naxalite, bequeathed a bouquet of songs and courage to the people who surrounded him. In the village of Piro and Sandesh, people remember the Kurmi as

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the full-throated, robust 'Kaviji'.

Narayan Mahto's ancestors belonged to the village of Kasaph in Udwantnagar block. But his father and uncles migrated and settled ultimately in Semroan. For his father, Jagat, and his two brothers, Jahan and Dudul, life was hard. His father's sixteen-bigha, irrigated plot became the bone of contention and eventually brought his family to the brink of ruin. This plot of land, which was his inheritance, was taken away and thus Jagat Mahto became virtually a landless peasant.

His doddering uncle, Jaikisan Mahto, recounts the machinations and coercion by which the Rajput, Babu Thakur Dayal Singh, took over the plot, Dudul Mahto was pauperised in a long-drawn litigation to recover the land. The three sons of Babu Thakur Dayal Singh were adamant. Under no circumstance would Rajeshwar Prasad Singh, Vyasmuni Singh and Vasishtmuni Singh part with the land. Whenever the Mahtos entreated them to restore their land, the three brothers would pounce on them. Being powerful no one dared to protest. Only Jaikisan dared to take the case to court. The consequences were terrible. One of Babu Thakur's sons-in-law filed a false case of murder in Faizabad far from Semraon, implicating Jaikisan and his angry nephew, Narayan. At the ID parade, Narayan was recognised and subsequently sent to jail. He was later released on bail.

On his way back to the village, Narayan encountered a singing *fakir* playing on his *nagara*. Narayan, who from childhood was interested in song and poetry, brought the man home as a guest. Only educated up to the seventh standard, he grew up to be a rhymester, a 'kavi' gifted with song. The people sat around him to hear him sing. They called him 'Narayan Kavi'.

Being poor, Narayan did not escape hardship. For a time he worked as a loader, lifting sacks of wheat on bullocks and wagons. Time and again, Babu Thakur's men lay in wait for this restive youth and severely assaulted him. One night, they made an abortive bid on his life while he was travelling to a village called Barhara. Another time, at the behest of his enemies, Ganesh Singh and Brijbihari Singh beat him up. Narayan did not go to court. But the village of Semraon grew more and more intolerable. Saddened and feeling insulted he quit his house and began to live in a hovel close to the Musahar quarters of

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the village.

But worse was do come. Two of his four sons died in tragic circumstances. The landlords of Hadiabad burnt his son Suresh Mahto fearing that like his father he too was a Naxalite. Another died of scorpion bite. The *Gita* and *Ramayan* reciting Narayan Kavi became a Naxalite. He went underground towards the end of 1972.

The first time his name was mentioned was when the police identified him as an associate of Dr Nirmal who had escaped along with him, breaking the Bahuara encirclement on 2 July 1975; and again when he escaped from the cordoned village of Baruhi on 17 August 1974 where Muni Pasi was killed.

Narayan Kavi met an untimely end on 31 March 1976 in the early hours of the morning while walking from Gurpa, towards Hanuman-Chapra, a village close to Ekwari, in Sahar. The police had cordoned off the village and he was trapped. Hundreds of people thronged to see his corpse when it was brought to the SP's residence at Ara and many eyes were moist when they cremated him on the bank at Gangi Ghat.

Described by the press as 'a top Naxalite' and 'theoretician of Naxalite criminology', he was wanted in several cases and carried a reward of Rs 5,000. The poet's song had ended. The refrain still continues. The child sings his father's song:

One day all die, no one remains.
In the service of the people, death achieves a dignity.

17 April 1976
Sahar, Sahar

The doctor of the Sahar block hospital in Ara subdivision was shot dead along with his wife. The son managed to escape. The assailants decamped with the DBBL gun belonging to the doctor. The police stated that the murder of Dr Laxshmi Chand was a case of reprisal. A few days earlier, he had not agreed to treat a wounded Naxalite. Another version said that the doctor was involved in the death of Gopal Jadhav in Sahar *thana* on 13 September 1974.

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8 May 1976
Sikrahata, Piro

The bomb attack on a group of villagers, acting as a village protection force, by Naxalites left two dead and three injured. Sikrahata had been disturbed since 1970 and this attack was part of a chain of events in the village. Though the Bhumihars, the only upper-caste section in the village, control 2,500 bighas of land between 34 households, numerical strength lay in the backward and scheduled castes. Barring the thirty-seven Ahir families who possess 725 bighas, Muslims and a few Koeris, the rest are all landless.

In 1970, an 18-day-long-agricultural labourers' *hartal* had paralysed the village. All work had come to a standstill. Ultimately a higher labour official had come to mediate, but the unrest simmered though wages were agreed to be raised from two to four rupees. The labourers' demand for *kathiya* which was a more acute need, was not conceded. The strike split Sikrahata into two antagonistic camps. The Bhumihars suspected the *mukhiya*, Kashinath Sao and a *dhobi* Biswanath Chaudhary as potential enemies, as those trying to fan resentment among the backward castes. Subsequently, they implicated Kashinath Sao, Chandrika Mahto, Biswanath Chaudhary and Budhu Yadav among others in the murder of Brijbehari Singh, a thirty-five-year-old Bhumihar cultivator possessing 80-85 bighas of land. The police blamed the murder on the Naxalites, though the bereaved members of his family believed that it was a consequence of the long litigation over land that Brijbihari Singh had fought with Janardan Singh and Ramanand Singh of his own community.

In November 1971, an armed group of men broke into the school at about 12 noon and murdered Ramlakhan Singh, an economics teacher, and Krishnanand Rai, a science teacher. The *chaprasi*, Ganesh Sao, was injured. No property was stolen and the Bhumihars stated that both the teachers had nothing to do with the politics of the village.

After this incident, the police arrived in large numbers and the Harijans of Sikrahata knew no peace. Policemen would enter their hovels and confiscate their meagre untensils, fowl, jewellery and grain. Disgusted by this continuing pillage, groups of

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Musahars fled from Sikrahata under the cover of night. A list of suspects was drawn up. Jawahar Dusadh, Jagdish Chamar, Ramadhar Chamar, Nain Mian, Ganesh Master, Nihati Ram Rajwar, Chabila Rai Dusadh, Sivanath Ram Dusadh were thrashed and bundled off to jail, and detained for two months.

In July 1974 a huge lot of furniture in the school was set on fire, but the interrogations did not reveal much. Ten days later, Budhu Jadhav, the *mukhiya* of the Gram Panchayat, was found hanging from a mango tree. Owner of 7-8 bighas of land, he had taken a leading role in the wage agitations between 1970-71 and was very popular among the Harijans. His death had an air of mystery about it. While the Bhumihars and the police claimed that it was a Naxalite action, the poor people attested that Budhu Jadav was planning to go on a fast to death in order to put an end to the violence that prevailed in the village. Frustrated, he had put an end to his life.

In the wake of growing violence, the Bhumihars of the Sikrahat decided to organise themselves into a resistance squad. On 8 May 1976, a group of Bhumihars on patrol were proceeding from the *khalihan* to the village. It was about ten at night. Suddenly, a deafening explosion rent the air. In the attack, Rambriksh Singh and Sukaldip Singh a middle schoolteacher, died on the spot, while Rajendra Singh and Baleshwar Singh were injured. Eighteen suspects were rounded up and served a month in detention.

This ongoing war between the Bhumihars and backward castes knew no immediate end. In July Kashinath Sao and some backward-caste social workers were attacked with bombs while relaxing in the courtyard. His nephew Vijendra Sao and Yaduri Chamar were injured. As a consequence Lalan Prasad Singh, Raghunandan Singh and Madheswar Singh were implicated; apart from Lalan Singh, the rest absconded. But the war continued. Time and again Jadhuni Ram, Nain Mian, Jawahar Dusadh, Ganesh Master, Ramashray Musahar, Nihati Rajwar, Chandrika Mahto, Chabila Dusadh, Sivanath Dusadh would be arrested. They would return to broken families, spent and exhausted, after languishing in jail.

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May 1976
Bhojpur

The police launched, "Operation Thunder" and arrested Parabhu Harijan. He had quit his post as an employee of the Ara Electricity Board, and become an important Naxalite leader. They also arrested Rameshwar Dusadh of Semraon village a close associate of the dead Narayan Kavi.

October 1976
Surni, Udwantnagar

"I fired on the jeep. Why are you arresting them?" When Jagjiwan Ram accosted the interrogating police officers, his long run as one of the ablest political commissars in the area was coming to a close. Minutes before, a police jeep had been riddled with bullets and contingents of police were scouring the area for the attackers. They were arresting and apprehending innocent peasants. Jagjiwan Ram was beaten and tortured, nails driven into his fingers, and sent to Bhagalpur Central Jail. Subsequently, he was killed while trying to escape from the jail with other suspects.

After his arrest, Surni's Musahars, Dusadhs and Chamars simmered, but no resistance was recorded. The arrest and interrogation of Murli Chamar from Sonatola revealed that as early as 1973 Naxalites had been visiting Surni. Murli Chamar was subsequently killed.

When Kalika Rai, belonging to the village of Kasap, was killed by the Chamars of Surni, there were signs that the village would no longer remain quiet. Above caste arrogance, according to the police and the Harijans, he always came to the Chamartoli in search of women to while away his nights. Jagnarain Chamar, who was arrested in Udwantnagar in the 3(2)74 320 ICP case, still languishes in Bhagalpur Central Jail.

Since then Surni had woken up. Even prior to the Naxalite killings, the writing on the wall was clear. As early as July 1972 Buddhu Hazam of Surni was killed; Saddhu, his brother, alleged that he had been murdered by the merciless *latheiths* of Rampati Chaudhury. Later that year in November they killed Raju Teli and robbed his valuables. In revenge Rampati Chaudhury was

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murdered. The powerfully built *pehlwan* was killed in the early hours of the morning while leaving his village. Among the Harijans who were implicated were Mahangoo Chamar, Goli Chamar, Dinanath Ahir, Shivprasad Chamar and Naresh Pande. The sessions trial is still on.

10 October 1976
Ekwari, Sahar

The information that a squad of Naxalites was resting at Munilal Mahto's hut had reached the police camp posted near the school in Ekwari. As evening fell a posse of forty to fifty police had begun to inch towards the Harijan quarters of the village. Apprehending encirclement, the hiding Naxalites had come out, and shouting 'Naxalbari Zindabad' escaped under the cover of darkness. The villagers had watched them walk through the centre of the village, clutching rifles in their arms.

But this time more reinforcements had arrived, and a fresh spurt of fire was aimed at the entrance to Munilal's hut. One of them hit the olive-green uniformed girl who till a few minutes before was keeping up the firing and thereby helping her associates to flee. A small chit of a girl; hair cut short, a little above four feet. Agile, known as a guerilla. Believed by intelligence circles to have led the attack on the landlords of Gurpa on 11 August 1976. The police had been searching for her, since she came to Bhojpur in 1975. An old *mukhiya* described her deeds as more valiant than those of the Rani of Jhansi. Known to the women around the villages of Sahar as Comrade Sheila Chatterjee.

The police kept up the fire and entrenched themselves around Munilal's hut. A long night of waiting. People behind the mud walls, tense with anticipation and shock. When morning broke and nothing stirred from behind the half-barred entrance to Munilal's hut, the SI Ramadhar Pande, moved up to the door. From the shadows, a man emerged behind his bullock. He was coming out when the SI Ram Sarikla Singh was about enter. At a distance the police watched, guns cocked. The SP S.N. Lal Gupta came forward and asked the man who he was. The villagers were watching too. The SP and Munilal were seen talking to each other. Munilal had sheltered the Naxalites. He

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was a landless peasant and stayed at Ekwari. A family man, thirty years old and unlettered. The Naxalites had been resting at his hut for the past three days.

All at once S.N. Lal Gupta turned on Munilal and fired. Once, twice. The people around watched the entire thing happen before their eyes. In the meantime some suspects had been rounded up: Sagar Mahto, Somara Mahto, Baijnath Mahto and others. While this was going on, constables and police stepped in and began to ransack the hut. Cartridges, conventional weapons like swords, explosives—in all, thirty thousand rupees worth of lethal arms were apparently recovered.

From a distance groups of villagers watched the ordeal. The night was over and it was broad daylight now. In time they picked up the two corpses. One was Sheila Chatterjee. The other body was fresh and warm. In the ravaged hut Munilal's wife lay weak and dazed in a corner. She had given birth to a child that same night. Describing the encounter to the press after a few hours, the SP said, "Munilal Mahto attempted to attack me with a sword. I fired in self-defence."

November 1976
Keasath, Nawanagar

A police outpost was attacked with bombs.

31 December 1976
Bhadwar, Brahmpur

In October 1976, a landlord was killed by Naxalites while ploughing his land. Following this, the upper-caste landlords started terrorising the Harijans, who they suspected were behind the murder, by looting their grain, setting fire to their huts and stealing their livestock. In this process more and more Harijans joined the Naxalites. The police who were called into restore order began to camp in the village school and received the patronage of the propertied, upper-caste landlords of Bhadwar.

On 31 December 1976 the BMP Camp was attacked and one constable died, while several others were injured. In the confusion no one was apprehended. But it is believed that at the behest of the landlords, one Harijan was killed by the police.

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But Bhadwar continued to simmer. An attempt to kill a forty-five-year old Rajput landlord, Satyanarain Singh was made in 1977. And in October 1978 Badri Singh was killed by the Naxalites. The village remains disturbed.

11 March 1977
Gurpa, Sahar

What happened on 11 March in Gurpa was a shade more diabolic than what had shaken the village of Chauri, almost four years ago. About seven months earlier, on 11 August 1976 a group of unidentified persons entered the village at night and brusquely went about their business. It was around 7 p.m. and before the Bhumihars could retaliate they had escaped after shooting Gopi Pande, Avadhbehari Pande, Jagannath Pande and Jagdish Pande. They all died. Seen as a Naxalite response to a deepening rift between the Bhumihars and Ahirs of the village, police were called in and began camping at the house of Dharam Pande.

On 11 March, the police left Gurpa. The time coincided with the 1977 elections in the area. That very evening, a mob of Bhumihars armed with guns and kerosene pillaged the Harijan quarters of the village, burning huts to cinders and killing innocent people. Three septuagenarians, Hiraman Kumhar, Kali Tato and Dipan Jadhav, who were too old to flee for safety, forty-five-year-old Tijiya Devi and twenty-four-year-old Phulkumari, a pregnant woman, were burnt to death. The Gurpa carnage was part of an all-out offensive by the landlords in Sahar, to teach restive Harijans a lesson. Dharam Pande, the most powerful landlord of Gurpa, was among those arrested after the killings. In jail, the unrepentant Dharam Pande swore, "When I return I will eliminate the word Harijan from the memory of Gurpa."

April 1977
Sahar, Bhojpur

The growing strength of the guerrillas also curbed the activities of bandits and miscreants. Ganeshi Musahar, well-known as a miscreant, used to lie in wait for travellers and loot them.

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He was killed after he refused to change his ways. Ramnath Bari, a notorious dacoit, was also done to death. In April 1977, twenty-five-year-old Sarju Lohar, a debauchee hated by all, was also killed. They were formerly supporters of the Naxalites, but were killed by them when they looted and robbed for their own gain, and not for the cause.

27 May 1977
Kolodehri, Sahar

Who killed Suraj Jadhav? The Naxalites? An Ahir by caste, Suraj Jadhav, belonged to the village of Dullamchak, three miles from Kolodehri. A humble, poor peasant, he was a sympathiser of the *garib* party. When the influence of Naxalism increased, the police picked up Suraj Jadhav as a suspect and tortured him. He broke down. His confession resulted in the raid at Bahuara. After that Suraj broke his links with the Naxalites and lived in fear. He never moved out of his village.

Thereafter, the SP S.N. Dube made him a chowkidar and the sight of Suraj Ahir strutting around Dullamchak, waving a cane in his hand, became a common sight for the peasants. On 27 May 1977 Suraj Ahir had to attend a marriage in Kolodehri. While the function was on a man called him out. As soon as he came out some persons accosted him and Suraj Ahir began to tremble. They said to Suraj Ahir, "Do you remember Bahuara?" Before he could reply, they fired.

Kolodehri had become one of the villages that every constable dreaded. While the Brahmins and Rajputs constituted 24 families, Kolodehri had a large backward-caste population. As early as in 1975 Basudev Singh, belonging to the village of Janakpuri, had come to attend a feast, along with his bodyguard, Jangbahadur Singh. After they had finished eating and were returning they were assaulted by the Naxalites near the *ahar*. In the skirmish Jangbahadur was killed and the rifle belonging to Basudev Singh was snatched, but he survived.

Suraj Singh, 55, the agile son of Kuar Singh, did not however survive. According to the lower-castes, he had a hand in all local dacoities. A 15-acre-landlord of Gaya, Suraj Singh looked after the 2 acres of land that belonged to him in Kolodehri, his uncle's place. Secretly he kept the wife of Bhaduka

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Teli, as his concubine, while his brother kept the wife of Dosa Mian. Another brother kept the mother of Mahepra Kahar. A family with the worst Bhumihar traditions. During the Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission he had acted as an accomplice of the landlords. The list of crimes that grew around the name of Suraj Singh made him a classic Naxalite target. People suspected he had a hand in the death of Baldev Ojha and that he was responsible for the long-drawn-out legal harassment of Janardan Lal, a *munshi* of Ara court. Further he had kept Teli Suri's wife bonded to his house. Even the police listed him as a known offender and he had once been convicted for 8 years on a charge of dacoity. Finally one night, Suraj Singh was killed a few yards away from the house of Baldev Ojha.

A 45-acre-landlord and hated moneylender, Baldev Singh and Suraj Singh were listed together as enemies. A squabble over a disputed plot of land earned him the enmity of Jagnath Mahto of the village. Like the hated Suraj Singh he was killed, too.

The war of the extremists on dacoits and criminals reached even Kolodehri. Tribhuvan Kahar was always contemptuous of the extremists; he swore that he would kill them because they killed people like him. He was proud that he was involved in the dacoity at the house of the prosperous Kali Mian. On 13 November 1978 Tribhuvan met his end. There were more criminals on the 'killing lists' of the Naxalites. Vipin Jadhav was one of the associates of the gang of Tribhuvan Kahar; he was planning to kill Behari Rajwar whom he suspected as the murderer of his master on 3 January 1979. He was surrounded near the house of Chati Pasi and killed.

In Kolodehri the spate of murders and the presence of a permanent police camp is now a reality.

13 June 1977
Ara

People in extremist-infested Kolodehri and Bichlitola of Sahar constituencies in Bhojpur district boycotted the elections *en bloc*. According to official sources, while the polling was generally dull with 25 to 35 per cent votes cast, the lowest

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percentage of votes polled (only 7.2 per cent) was recorded at booth no. 106 under Kewari Constituency, also an extremist-infested area.

14 June 1977
Patna

According to R. N. Dash, Bihar's Home Secretary, the presiding officer of Piro polling booth in Bhojpur district was badly injured on 13th night in the course of a bomb attack on the booth by a group of men stated to be Naxalites.

16 August 1977
Ekwari, Sahar

Like Suraj Ahir, no informer survives. The death of Nathuni Kahar of Ekwari still remains a mystery to some villagers. The Bhumihars keep asking, who killed Nathuni? Others know that he was killed by the Naxalites. The story goes that a group of Naxalites was camping at his hut. Afraid of the consequences, he went to the police. In the raid that followed, the Naxalites managed to escape. But Nathuni Kahar, the informer, lost his life soon after.

24 August 1977
Baghi, Sahar

When Shivyas Singh was murdered on 24 August no one in Baghi imagined that it would be the blackest day for the Harijans. It was about 4 p.m. when his brother Ramjas Singh came upon his body. The forty-five-year old *mukhiya* of Baghi had no enemies. In fact, he often went to the southern edges of the village—the Musahartoli to relax.

Like Berath in Sahar block, Baghi remained under the writ of 40-45 Rajput households; Lalan Singh and Gopal Singh, who owned 150 bighas of land each, were the most feared by the backward castes. Among the lower castes the 32 households of Musahars were by far the largest in number. And Shivyas Singh was friendly towards them. The rift came almost without warning.

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According to the Sangharsh Vahini, Shivyas Singh had gone one day to the Musahartoli as usual in the evening. Seeing a crowd of unknown faces at the liquor shop of Buchan Sao Musahar he is believed to have said: "*Tohni ke Naxalite ke rakhle baron ka re*?" (So you are sheltering Naxalites). At once a group of unidentified men emerged from the shadows and pounced upon Shivyas Singh.

But after Shivyas's death panic gripped the Musahars. Before the Rajputs could retaliate, the agile, fleet-footed Musahars crept away in the darkness. The next day when armed groups of Rajput landlords converged on the Musahartoli, not one Musahar was to be seen. But the pillage was complete. The Rajputs took away their fowl and livestock and stores of grain. Years of calm had come to an end.

3 October 1977
Seotha, Sahar

The obscure village of Seotha continues to burn. Half a mile from Baruna it is associated with the prominent Naxalites, Butan and Chamku Musahar, whose in-laws belong to Seotha. As early as December 1974 the first killing was recorded in the village. While the evening fell a squad murdered the 30-year-old Rajput, Rampravesh Singh, while he was carrying his grain to the *khalihan*. Though the villagers attested that they did not see the assailants, the litigation and police measures began. Many were arrested and implicated, spending long terms in detention. In fact, one of them, Raghuvansh Ram is still in confinement.

For two years after the annihilation of Rampravesh Singh Seotha did not witness any violence. In 1976, according to the case Sahar 2(6)76 a group of Naxalites attacked the Rajputs. It is alleged that they were sheltering in Seotha, and when they were leaving the Rajputs raised an alarm, apprehending an attack. The armed Naxalites fired in self-defence, and some of the Rajputs were injured. Arrests followed. Subsequently, in retaliation, the Rajputs set alight the huts of Harijans—Rambalak Ram Mahendra Ram, Raghubir Dusadh, Sipahi Ram and Rambachan Ram. Cattle and other livestock were also carried away by the attackers. Though time and again the aggrieved Harijans

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have sent out petitions to the District Collector, Land Relations (DCLR), Ara, stating that some of their cattle are being held by the Rajputs, nothing has come of these protests.

The pillage of Seotha continued during the Emergency too. On various occasions the police raided the village. Elsewhere the police arrested Harischand Chamar of Seotha. They claimed that bombs were found in his possession and the Sahar *thana* case 8(3)76 was registered. In Seotha the Harijans continued to bear the brunt of police torture. They witnessed in front of their eyes the beatings and torture of Ugan Ram's wife, Sinathi Ram's mother, Raghuvansh's mother, Raghuvir's wife, Jaykumar's wife and the wife of Rambalam. Even the menfolk did not escape beating on the slightest pretext. The police also looted the fowl of Ramsidh Ram, Rajbalam Ram, Munaka Ram and Ram Nukar Ram.

Harijan response was slow. In order to escape this daily and intermittent harassment they decided to quit Seotha and shift to the villages of their relatives. But at the same time resentment and unrest began to brew in the hovels of Seotha. The Rajputs were quick to smell danger. They singled out Ramprashad Chamar, severely assaulting him with rifles and lethal weapons. Ramprashad Chamar died as a result and consequently a case was registered and Rajputs implicated. In the attack on Ramprashad Chamar other Harijans were injured: Fakar Ram, and his mother, Rambachan Ram, Mina Kumari, Dhanmukhiya and the mother of Rajbalam.

The mounting attacks on restive Harijans by Seotha's Rajputs was part of an organised campaign. They had established contacts with the Rajputs of Jwar who were known members of the anti-Naxalite organisation. Their numbers rose from the support of 40-50 rifles from the villages of Hadiabad, Baghi, Bajreya, Bargaon and Godilia. Though the Harijan losses were comparatively low, the first advance of the Rajputs was ensured. Since the attack on 3 October 1977 a permanent police camp was posted in Seotha; and an Anti-Naxalite Committee headed by a Harijan President, Ramsidh Ram, and a Rajput secretary, Dipti Singh, with a total of nine members came into existence in the ravaged village.

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17 December 1977
Koni, Sahar

Koni in Sahar continued to be disturbed. On 17 December 1977 an unidentified group of extremists surprised Madan Rai and Awadesh Rai who were protecting their crops in the *khalinan*. They killed Awadesh Rai, and snatched away Madan Rai's rifle. Routine responses followed. The police rounded up Shivkrit, Ramjatan, Sakaldip, Chandradip, Mahendra Dusadh, Hiralal Chamar and other suspects whom the landlords listed in their reports.

The villages adjoining Koni were disturbed too. Since 1971, political awareness had been growing in the contiguous villages of Semraon and Barhara. At the centre of this change were three Communist-minded persons. Dr Ganeshi, Misri Mahto and the *mukhiya* of Koni, Bhairavprashad Gupta. Surajvansh Pande, the *dafadar* of Koni, was apprehensive of these three.Their appeal among the lower castes had grown over the years. While Ekwari and Chauri were blazing with stories of extremist actions, the first spark was lit in Koni in September 1971. The case registered by Vinodh Kumar Pande stated that one night while returning from nearby Barhara, his father Surajvansh Pande was shot and killed by a group of men who were lurking in the sugarcane fields. Misri Mahto and three others were accused in this connection.

The next year, 1972, the corpse of Satyanarain Teli, a notorious person, was found. Once again suspicion fell on Misri Mahto. In 1973 Bipinbehari Mahto, a close associate of Surajvansh Pande, was beheaded while he was sleeping near his house. This happened in broad daylight, at about eleven in the morning. Once again, the police suspected that it was an extremist action, though none were implicated. As a reprisal Purushottam Mahto, son of Bipinbehari, killed Misri Mahto. He along with Badanand Mahto were held as accused consequently.

By the time Misri Mahto was killed much else had happened. After the death of Surajvansh Pande, the police arrested Misri Mahto and Dr Ganeshi and claimed to have confiscated arms and ammunition from them. Both were tortured in jail, but being in the CPI the party mobilised support in their favour. Subsequently the then SP, J.N. Srivastava, by

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pressure and mediation appealed for clemency for them. Later the Janata regime .withdrew all the charges that were framed against Dr Ganeshi.

The bloody incidents that were rocking Koni grew out of its past history. As early as in 1960 upper caste-lower caste tension was coming to the boil in the adjacent village of Siadih. At about this time Gayan Teli, a lower-caste man, was murdered by the upper castes. By 1974 the lower castes were no longer docile. Jagannath Tewari was killed by bombs on 17 May 1974; he had harassed Ramdas Musahar by refusing to pay equitable wages and had been responsible for the assault on Ramdas. The upper castes, on the other hand, suspecting Rampravesh Mahto as having a major share in the killing of Tewari, killed him on 29 May 1974. 40-year-old Rampravesh Mahto was known as a person sympathetic to the Harijans of Koni.

When Bhairavprasad had protested against the assault on his son for plucking mangoes on 14 April 1974, he had been mercilessly beaten by Ramchandra Singh. The Rajput landlords were gunning for Bhairavprasad Gupta. A prosperous peasant, he was the first backward-caste man to be elected as *mukhiya* by the Semraon-Sandesh Panchayat. He held the post for an uninterrupted tenure of almost ten years. Always concerned for the development of the panchayat, he figured as a leading Congress member. The credit of building a post office and a girls' school in the village was his. Being articulate, during the 1960s tension he particularly aroused the enmity of the landlords. Since then they always sought to harass him, often raiding and looting his house. The events of 1971-72 made things worse.

On 29 July 1974 around 7 p.m. while returning on his cycle from Garhani Bazar, Bhairavprasad was attacked by a group of landlords and brutally murdered, his eyes savagely mutilated. K.D. Singh, the SP, noted, "There is no conclusive evidence regarding the death of Bhairavprasad Gupta. In this area upper-lower caste tension has been increasing. It is also becoming apparent that the backward castes are becoming Naxalites. The death of Bhairavprasad Gupta is an outcome of this growing tension."

The villages around Koni remained disturbed. Narayan Kavi and Hira Yadav from neighbouring Semraon were part of this tension. It was learnt by the Sangharsh Vahini that a Yadav

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lad, Syambehari, had been arrested on 29 January 1978 as an alleged Naxalite. A police camp had been posted at the house of Madan Rai. They met Sharifu Yadav, witness, who along with Avadesh was implicated in the Madan Rai murder case. They were also connected with the incident of 28-29 January 1978 in Koni.

They said that on 28 January at about 7 p.m. in the evening, three shots were heard from the direction of Syambehari's house and a group of men shouting Naxalite slogans were seen fleeing. The next day at 6 a.m., Behari fired upon Madan Rai while he was going to the latrine in the fields, On raising an alarm people gathered and caught Behari, who had a pistol and two cartridges on him. Madan Rai went to the Sahar police station and at about 11 a.m. the police came and arrested Syambehari. He pleaded that he be shot since he did not have any faith in the police and urged his brother to inform Ram Ekbal of Piro.

On the 28th Syambehari and Tunku of Orsi had come to Koni after visiting him. 3 persons appeared along with 10-12 others. They said that they were Syambehari, Ganeshi and Naresh. On being accosted, Madan Rai who assumed that they were from the village asked them to come forward. Awadesh Rai succumbed and Madan Rai was injured. A gun and a rifle were snatched by the attackers. A case was lodged and for 8 days the three absconded. When they returned no one in Koni informed on them.

That very day, Rajinder Sharma, DSP, Bhojpur, along with a posse of 8-10 policemen came to Koni to investigate the murder. The villagers said that Syambehari had come to Koni at about 4-5 p.m. on that same day. Some people were warming their hands and he joined them. Simultaneously some men gathered near the gully and began to shout in unison at a distance from his house. They moved to Sharifu Yadav's house. They were about 40-50 Bhumihars, armed with lathis and *bhaalas* from the nearby villages of Chauri and Dhhancchuan. They kept firing blanks and the villagers rān in different directions in fear. In the 2 hours of chaos some of the frightened people had gone and hidden in the fields. In the fracas, Radhuni Jawahar, and Syambehari's father, Jhakar, crept away to Sahar to inform the police. At about 6 p.m. Sharifu began to shout seeing the Bhumihars; Syambehari was milking his cow. On

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hearing them fire blanks he hid in his house. At about 10 a.m. his mother who went out to serve him his meal fell to one of the bullets, Syambehari escaped and hid in the subhedar's house, but they got hold of him and began to assault him. His mother ran to his rescue but they caught him and brought him to Madan Rai's house where the police came and arrested him at 11 a.m. That evening he had returned from the Orsi camp, organised by Ram Ekbal.

When he returned to Koni that day Syambehari heard the Bhumihars shout, "Kill him." "Devraj Yadav assaulted me. I ran to the ploughman's house but they dragged me to Madan Rai's house and locked me up. Kapil Rai, a lad from Dhhancchuan, began to interrogate me after clearing the crowds. He asked why I had shown Madan Rai a dagger. Later Kamla Rai came and said. 'I do not want to hit you'." It was learnt that Kapildev Rai, a relative of Madan Rai, of Dhhancchuan had been in conflict with a man from Bhatirghi over a plot of 12 bighas for the past 10 years. Kapildev Rai had forcibly tilled the land and harvested it. The previous year, at the time of harvesting he had asked Syambehari to assist him and Syambehari had refused to participate in an illegal act. Kapil Rai and Madan Rai upbraided him, later they forced Sharifu Yadav to help. The murder followed and Syambehari was accused. The DSP is believed to have told the Bhumihars to set up another case because Syambehari would go scot free, and planned the incident of 28 January.

May 1978
Uttardaha

Uttardaha, situated on the borders of Nawanagar, Jagdishpur and Brahmpur, was one the villages to go under the wave of Naxalism. Like the villages of Bhadwar, Bagen, Baruhi and Kataigram it was dominated largely by the Kurmis; 110 families of them sided with the Rajputs on most matters and it was the 85 Ahir households that rose to the leadership of the backward castes. But Uttardaha which fell in the Rajput sphere of influence gradually produced a spineless, kowtowing section of Ahirs.

Prominent among the Ahirs was Havaldar Jadav who was

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involved in crime; the weapon that he always carried was bought from Calcutta but despite his belligerent, reckless ways his association with the alleged Naxalite, Sandha Dusadh, endeared him to the rank and file of them. Once he fell out, people say that he earned the hatred of the Naxalites and Sandha Mahto, who protested when he stole a poor Mahto's cow, became his sworn enemy. He assaulted Sandha; and then the reprisal of death was only a matter of time. According to Jagdishpur PS 3(5)78 Havaldar Jadhav was killed near the Dusadhtoli. Amongst the 15 who were accused Sandha and Musahib Yadav went *faraar* and joined the Naxalite underground.

But Uttardaha continued to remain disturbed even after the alleged Naxalites fled the village. On 8 September a Kurmi school-teacher, Rameshwar Mahto, who was regarded as innocent, died as an outcome of misunderstanding. So did the tyrannical 10-acre-landlord Fagu Mahto, 45, who was closely associated with Havaldar Yadav. Thus the poor who were irritated with his rapacious ways did justice to Fagu. Bhola Mahto, Radhacharan Mahto, Prem Mahto, Param Mahto who were accused in his death were detained but were released on bail after 60 days.

In the police map of disturbed areas, Uttardaha became one of the most stubborn points of Harijan intransigence. Shortly after, when a squad killed Kameswar Singh, a Mahanth, and the Harijans seized more than fifty acres of his land, armed police were brought in and posted at his house. Rumours say that Kameswar Singh survived and repaired to the village of Masarh where he owned some land. But the Naxalite presence in Uttardaha continued, spreading to the adjoining villages of Devrar and Arayla. Reports of grain confiscation from the landlords by guerrilla *dastas* and open meetings of the Naxalites, began to trickle into the police camp stationed in the Naxalite-affected areas.

3 January, 1979
Narahi-Chandi, Koelwar

The winds from the disturbed block of Sahar took time to reach Narahi-Chandi in Koelwar. Situated barely one kilo-

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metre from the thana at Koelwar near the Sone river, the two villages are cheek-by-jowl—the people, call them Narahi-Chandi. The Rajputs, who control three-fourths of the land in Narahi-Chandi, never considered the lower castes as enemies. And the Kurmis and Ahirs, the principal business communities, are not as poor as they are in Sahar. Indulging in small trade and cultivating *batai* land, they were never considered an intransigent section.

It was only as late as on 3 January, when the affluent Rajput, Ramdeo Singh, his father and mother, were killed, that Narahi-Chandi began to figure in the list of disturbed villages of Bhojpur. Despite the brutal killings the SP, T.P. Singh, saw little reason for unease, "Ramdeo Singh's murder was not a Naxalite one, as far as investigations have been done till now. But the witnesses have tried to colour it as Naxalite. . .this was a clash between two goonda groups."

Below the surface of the SP's observations lay another story, not known to the administration. Everyone in the village knew that Ramdeo Singh slept with a maidservant, the widow of Jhagaru Kahar. According to the police she was also in love with Kishun Mahto, the chowkidar of the village. The web was even more complicated. Ramdeo Singh's own sister was in love with a Kahar youth, whom the chowkidar happened to know. As a result when Ramdeo Singh's sister was getting married in April 1978, the *shamiana* was rocked with a bomb explosion. In the subsequent litigation, Kishun Mahto was framed as guilty, and the tension between the village chowkidar and the family of Ramdeo Singh deepened; only one threat remained for Ramdeo Singh – Ramkishun, the brother of the chowkidar.

On 30 October 1978, Ramkishun was waylaid. And the police in connivance did not even register the name of the principal witness, Laxman Baruhi. Kishun Mahto, the chowkidar, could bear it no longer. Further, the police did not arrest Ramdeo Singh and the seven persons who were accused in the death of Ramkishun. It so happened, that his brother, Kishun, happened to be the brother-in-law of Baijnath Mahto, who hailed from the village of Bargaon in Sahar block.

To the lower-caste sections of Narahi-Chandi, Ramdeo Singh was more than a terror. Unmarried, he often forced their women to submit to his lust. Many women: the wife of Kamla

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Kahar, the wife of Moti Hajam, the wife of Shama Kahar, the daughter of Shivpojan Teli, the wife of Dhonda Sonar, the daughters of Rameshis Mahto and Jaswant Singh, the wives of Katheri Yadav and Milan Kahar, were the subject of Ramdeo Singh's insatiable lust. And the people therefore rose to sympathise with Kishun Mahto.

When Ramdeo Singh was returning from the local market on 3 January 1979 four men with rifles advanced towards him. Before he could enter his house, a shot was heard. Ramdeo Singh fired back with his revolver, escaping into his house. Firing continued for more than an hour. When the attackers finally broke down the door they did not spare anyone: Ramdeo Singh, his mother and father, were killed; their faces disfigured with choppers. Their bodies were finally recovered, three furlongs away on the railway lines of Koelwar. A savage end of a tyrant. According to the police the attackers numbered more than forty, and the incident was the bloodiest in the decade long war in the district of Bhojpur.

In the case that was registered, 3(1)79, Koelwar IPC 302, there were many who were accused: Sakal Ahir, Katheri Ahir, Hariman Ahir, Chandrika Dusadh, Ramavtar Dusadh, Vishnu Dusadh, Bhuteli Dusadh, Jogendra Dusadh, Ramalal Mahto, Lalan Mahto, Srikishun Thakur, Jaishri Thakur. The police beat up Upendranath Tewari whom they suspected, too. Rajbali Mahto, Ramkishun Mahto and Kishun Mahto went *faraar*. Repercussions followed. Two days later, the Rajputs set the huts of Jitan, Algoo and Lalgi Dusadh on fire. Case 8(1)79 listed Harwansh Singh, Sudama Singh and others.

Those who were related to Ramdeo Singh carried the three corpses all the way to Jayprakash Narayan's residence at Kadam Kuan, Patna. They demanded justice; after all JP had promised that in five years peace would return to Bhojpur. The Total Revolution was still to be born.

Unsatisfied, they loaded them on trucks and took them to the Assembly in Patna. A cruel twist of irony. In the villages of Narahi-Chandi the fire had just begun. On 23 April, Triveni Singh, the Rajput *mukhiya*, was assaulted in a local bazaar. People said that the *faraar* Ram Bali Mahto was behind it. The police camp that was set up at Narahi-Chandi remains till this day. From Sahar to Koelwar, the message had taken more

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than a decade to find receptive ears.

November-December, 1979
The Year of the Famine

The end of the year brought hunger. Nine blocks in the district were declared as famine zones. And the first massive procession that the Naxalites took out on the streets of Ara in November 1979—almost a decade after the Harijanistan march led by Jagdish Mahto and Rameswar Ahir—demanded among other things the removal of police camps, immediate relief for the poor and the famished. In the countryside, however, at places, poor peasants took their destinies in their hands.

In the village of Asudhan, Jagdishpur the Rajput Dinanath Singh fell a victim to the hunger of the lower castes. When the Musahars, Ahirs and Rajwars asked Dinanath to give them rice, he refused. They raided his house, looting hundreds of maunds of rice. When the SDO Ram Dhyan Prasad came to Asudhan, the poor peasants made no attempt to hide the truth, saying that they were prepared to suffer rather than die of hunger.

The village of Madura, Jagdishpur was hungry, too. But when the Naxalities asked the *mukhiya* for rice, he complied. The peasants of Kakila, Jagdishpur kept requesting the landlords not to sell the grain to outside traders, because they were starving. They promised to do anything if the Banias gave them food to eat. When the landlords refused and began to proceed on their way to the market, the Musahars raided the tractors. They did the same thing in the villages of Dalippur and Bharasan.

In Fathepur, Tarari, the famine victims turned violent. At the head of the unrest was a man the police had long forgotten: Ram Ekbal Dusadh. After the snatching of a Bhumihar landlord's rifle, he had gone *faraar* with Hari Dusadh, in June 1974. His wife had taken poison, grief-stricken at his long absence, and believing that among those who died in the encounter at Bahuara was her husband. But Ram Ekbal had been arrested and had returned after languishing for a year in Bhagalpur Central Jail. In October 1979 it was Ram Ekbal Dusadh, the one-time SSP worker turned Naxalite, who posed the threat to

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the landlords of Fatehpur.

Even though the Bhumihars complied, accepting that they would not sell grain outside, the Banias did not. At this the Musahars raided and looted them, decamping with sixty maunds of grain. When the police arrived they admitted their role in the action: subsequently, the landlords collected 20,000 rupees and called for a police camp, afraid that the paddy crops may be looted.

On 19 December 1979, the police camp at Fatehpur was attacked at about 4.45 p.m. In the encounter three constables died on the spot. While Kameshwar Singh and Damodar Singh died immediately, Bhagwan Singh succumbed later. The Naxalites escaped with seven rifles and about three hundred rounds of ammunition. The camp was taken almost by surprise; and everyone saw the Naxalites, leave slowly, firing a shot in the air, and shouting "Janta math darna, janta ko nahi marna hai"— People, do not be scared. You are not going to die.

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CHAPTER FOUR

For Reasons of State

The enemy is everywhere. The olive-green, uniformed gun-toting BMP or CRP regulars; police posts perched on landlord houses of brick and stucco; well-oiled musclemen of rich land-owners; peace committees in homespun khadi and tyre sandals; the upper-caste press in Patna; academicians in 'neutral' seats of learning, in alliance with the counter-insurgency top bosses.

Every time a jeep with government markings swings down the dusty strip of road that slices the Sahar countryside, word goes round. At the barbed-wired police outpost at Garhani, a few kilometres from Ara, reinforcements come daily. Slit-eyed Gurkhas stand at the alert, cocked carbines at the ready. Contingents of paramilitarymen zero in, surround a 'disturbed' village in the early hours and start routine round-ups of 'suspects'.

Half-naked emaciated Musahars and Chamars with their ribs sticking out are hustled into standing jeeps as bayonets prick their back. Often resistance is offered and a skirmish ensues —the smell of powder lingers, a few corpses on either side litter the open space; women linger in the shadows while their men are led away, their hands roped to their backs. One part of 'Operation Thunder' is over; the rest, not visible at close range, is more sordid.

For reasons of state, "Operation Thunder" continues in spurts of mercy-killings euphemistically termed 'encounters' and the growing stream of paramilitary personnel from the cantonment at Danapur, Patna, to the interior villages of Bhojpur shows no sign of abating.

The early seventies in Bihar were ripe with premonition. Scattered groups of extremists survived on either side of the Ganges. Others languished in jail. The movement launched by

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the CPI(ML) appeared fragmented. But the state still apprehended an escalation of violence. On 8 October 1970 the Bihar cabinet decided to reconsider the revalidation of the lapsed Preventive Detention Act to deal with deterioration of law and order. The press proclaimed that the hunt for Charu Mazumdar was on. Reports of extremists in Surajgarha and Musahari areas of Monghyr and Muzaffarpur (Saran) districts and the arrest of the Amalendu Sen and Mary Tyler group in the Ruam jungles of Hazaribagh, kept shaking a hitherto sluggish state apparatus into uneasy alertness.

A Bihar daily, *The Indian Nation*, reported on 9 October 1970, "Bihar police will be given some special powers to deal with growing the Naxalite menace in the state effectively. This decision was taken by the Bihar cabinet today, which discussed the law and order situation of the state at a special meeting. It was decided that the police force be strengthened immediately and steps be taken to organise the CID. The cabinet was informed that the Naxalites have committed 26 murders and 9 dacoities of serious nature in the state." This pronouncement came in the wake of growing extremism in the state of Bihar; and the district-wise break-up of cases and persons arrested till July 1970 was sufficiently awe-inspiring for the state to view it with alarm.

Out of a total of 17 districts, 11 had been penetrated by the Naxalites, the press note stated. In Bihar, subsequent paramilitary repression in the 'disturbed' areas pursued an inflexible strategy based on two primary considerations: first, extremism was a law-and-order problem, and second, special powers were necessary to deal with the Naxalites.

Another fact came to light: Shahabad, bifurcated in 1973-74 into Bhojpur and Rohtas districts, did not figure in the published list of 'affected' districts. The urbane and erudite policeman-journalist B.N. Sinha, DIG (Naxalite), adequately stressed this distinction, "The cult of violence in Bihar, as also in the belt from Sahar to Mokameh, has its two phases: the first, between 1967 to 1971, was very much marked in north Bihar and southernmost Bihar and the second phase, since 1972 to the present time, is writ large in Bhojpur, Patna, Nalanda, Giridih,

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Hazaribagh and Dhanbad."[1] And though attempts at chalking out a Maoist strategy in Shahabad were made as early as 1967, soon after the eruption of Naxalbari in north Bengal, Sinha continued, "the area of the second phase remained apparently out of purview of the public scrutiny".[2]

Its spread came at a time when in other areas it was petering out: "It was in 1971 that pockets of extremism were formed in Sahar P.S. By this time the Naxalites in North Bihar and even in the Chhotanagpur belt were on the run," speculated B.N. Sinha. Shahabad continued to be left out of the news. It was only after a bitter peasant-police encounter in an obscure village called Chauri in Sahar block caught the headliness of the Bihar press in May 1973, that the existence of a peasant movement led by Naxalites of the district become common knowledge.

On the morning of 6 May 1973, a posse of paramilitary forces, surrounded the village in order to arrest 'suspected persons' involved in the looting of grain from a visiting trader. On entering the village, groups of agricultural labourers put up a fierce resistance. The police fired and the encounter lasted for a few hours. Four peasants were killed, and some constables injured. The Chauri outrage got ample coverage and discordant voices were heard.

Ranjit Bahadur Singh, MLC, appealed to political party leaders to give full support to the administration to deal with law-and-order problems like the one created in Chauri and praised the administration for timely action in dealing with the explosive situation with a firm hand.[3] On the other hand the former Police Minister, Ramanand Tewari, Chairman of the Bihar State Socialist Party, stated that the Chauri incident in the district of Bhojpur was not a Naxalite menace but a struggle between the landowners and the landless for increased wages.[4] The socialist leader, Karpoori Thakur, went on a hungerstrike demanding justice for the bereaved. That the shaky Kedar

[1]B.N. Sinha, "From Naxalbari to Ekwari". *The Searchlight*, Patna, 11 June 1975.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]*The Indian Nation*, Patna, 11 May 1973.

[4]*Ibid.*

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Pande ministry in Bihar was in a hurry to allay resentment from socialist quarters grew more and more obvious.

The setting up of the Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission and the publication of its findings on 31 December 1975, however, did not sufficiently reveal that the 'special powers' and the 'law-and-order' approach to a politico-social phenomenon had actually provided the rationale behind the trigger-happy BMP and CRP regulars going berserk in Chauri on that day.

In fact, Aswini Kumar Sinha, of the Arrah bar, one of the lawyers who represented the Harijans and victims before the Commission, was disgusted with its outcome. The report, (RCFIC), according to him, was something he never expected. Aswini Kumar Sinha appeared wan and broken. Describing the incident in subdued anger, he said, "Chauri was not a Naxalite incident, but one having its roots in an agrarian dispute. The case which was initially instituted as one of simple theft under sections 143/144 of the Indian Penal Code, was subsequently converted into U/S 395 IPC implying robbery or dacoity. This was done in order that the police could have a free hand in Chauri. An agrarian problem was thus turned into a law-and-order one."

That the prevailing situation was not taken into account was very clear from the way Chauri was tackled. Aswini Kumar Sinha was one of the many who visited Chauri. "After the incident Baliram Bhagat, MP, and myself visited Chauri. We met the wife of Lalmohar Dusadh, one of the four peasants who died in the firings. She told us a different story. During harvesting, she along with other women, was working on the fields. The son of a Bhumihar landlord who was supervising the operations molested her in full view of other women. They, however, continued to work on the field. But when they returned home that evening they decided to quit working totally. Lalmohar on hearing of his wife's molestation was very angry . . . .What I saw and heard made my blood boil. Old women were crying and Lalmohar's wife kept breaking down in sobs. No males remained in the village. Most of them had fled while others had been arrested. It is horrible to realise that with the fruits of your backbreaking labour, landlords have constructed palatial buildings."

The facts of Chauri revealed a state of tension that existed

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prior to the events of 6 May 1973. It was common knowledge in the surrounding villages that poor Harijan women who slept with Bhumihar scions got an extra bundle of grain to carry home. One of the reasons for growing unrest was the fact that the Bhumihar landlords of Chauri were coercing the lower-caste female labourers to do harvesting work at nights for obvious sexual benefits. Added to it were problems of reduced or inadequate wages paid to the labourers.

A visiting trader from Arwal, Gaya, who had been carting away grain he had purchased from the Chauri landlords was dispossessed by a group of peasants led by Ganeshi Dusadh on 26 April 1973. Following this, events moved fast. Rajdeo Ram, MLA of Sahar Reserved Constituency, recommended the issue of gun licences to some Chauri landlords stating that the growth of Naxalism was making personal security, as well as security of crops, a delicate affair.[5] At the monthly crime meeting in the office of the SP, Ara, an anonymous petition addressed by '*Ek Bhayabhit Gramin*' (A terrorised villager) was forwarded to the SP for consideration.

The spirit of this meet was expressed by Inspector M.S. Baghel who was involved in the Chauri orgy: "Some residents of Chauri had submitted a petition to the DM. From the contents of their anonymous petition which had been read out to us by the SP at the District Crime Meeting, I got the impression that those local residents were terror-stricken on account of Naxalite activities. We had taken measures to restore confidence in their minds."[6] During the Commission proceedings S.M. Shoeb, DSP, categorically stated, "At the District Crime Meeting the SP did not direct the IO to probe into the reasons or causes of increased violent activities in Chauri."[7]

The strong-arm approach was brought out in a subsequent question put to the DSP.

Commission: Was it decided that stern action should be taken in Chauri?

Answer: It was decided to take proper action there.

[5]RCFIC, p. 14.
[6]Unpublished records of Ashwini Kumar Sinha.
[7]*Ibid.*

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Accordingly, the Chauri siege swung into operation, in the early hours of 6 May 1973.

Inspector M.S. Baghel stated. "The DSPs with my consultation chalked out the plan according to which we were to enter the *busti* from three directions. It was our plan to comb the Dusadhtoli from the west, south and north so as to prevent any person from the Dusadhtoli running away in these directions." That the Bhumihar landlords were seen as more than mere tacit accomplices to the Chauri siege was revealed in innuendo: "There are houses of Bhumihars in the contiguous east of the Dusadhtoli. We did not make any deputation on the eastern side of the *busti* because the scope for escaping from the Dusadhtoli was only from the west, north and south." And later, "Only four villagers of Chauri assisted us in our operations. They were taken by us to act as search witnesses as they were all Bhumihars."[8]

The SP had ordered that warrants be issued on those listed in the grain-looting case and subsequently arrests be made. The following day, under the jurisdiction of the Inspector, Piro circle, a police party reached Chauri at about 6 a.m. Two Bhumihar villagers, Siaram Rai and Girija Nandan Sharma, were enlisted as witnesses to the search. Hardly had Nagendra Singh, Officer-in-charge (Sahar), along with some constables entered the house of Khaderan Dusadh, than about fifty to sixty persons began to shower brickbats and cry, "Assault the police." The police party, fearing that they would be surrounded, retreated to the canal and asked for reinforcements.

Meanwhile, the Inspector enlisted the cooperation of Jagnarain Singh, sarpanch of Bahuara, and Suraj Singh of Kolodehri to mediate in order that the fourteen persons accused in the grain-looting case might surrender peacefully.[9] But the attempt failed. The labourers informed them that on no account would they allow searches, arrests and attachment of property. Reinforcements arrived at 10.45 a.m. headed by 2 DSPs and several officers and men. Another attempt at a peaceful settlement proved abortive.

When the police entered the village, violence broke loose.

[8] *Ibid.*
[9] RCFIC.

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The fight ended at 1.30 p.m. Lalmohar Dusadh died on the spot, Ganeshi Dusadh on the way to hospital and Balkeswar Dusadh and Dinanath Teli at Ara Sadar Hospital on the same day. No women or children were injured. The police fired 19 rounds. Sahar PS case No 3(5)73 was instituted against 47 persons and 36 were taken into custody. On the side of the police, 19 persons sustained injuries. A BMP platoon was posted in Chauri subsequently.

Reporters and political personalities who converged on Chauri filed their reports. The upper-caste press in Patna concluded a Chauri report saying: "Whatever may be the genesis of the episode, the police action has restored confidence among the terror-stricken upper-caste people and created panic among the backwards." The socialist leader Karpoori Thakur demanded the setting up of an all-party inquiry committee to probe into the circumstances leading to the police firing in Chauri. Visiting the village (along with Bhola Prasad Singh, Vinayak Prasad, both SSP MLAs, and Jagdeo Prasad of the Shoshit Dal), Ram Sakal Singh, a former SSP MLA, said, "There was no immediate cause of police action in the village. Moreover the police opened fire without any permission to this effect. There was no magistrate present. No lathicharges and firing of teargas – prerequisites for police firing—were undertaken."[10]

Commenting on Chauri, Aswini Kumar Sinha was vehement: "As far as Chauri was concerned, the police were in an obvious hurry to save their skins. The administrative and police personnel involved were rank casteists: Mrs Krishna Singh, DM, K.D. Singh, DSP, K.P. Singh, SP, M.S. Baghel, DC, Nagendra Singh were all Rajputs by caste. The medical evidence proved beyond doubt that those four Harijans were killed at close range. The bullet wounds were charred and black which implies that they were shot at a distance of less than two feet. The bodies of the deceased showed marks of dragging. Dr Mahabir Das, the Civil Assistant Surgeon of Ara Sadar Hospital, who performed the post mortem, was not entertained as an official witness by the Commission because he was a Harijan. People can tell lies, not facts. The police were merciless and created a reign of terror in the village. Since then, I have lost whatever

[10]Interview with Ram Sakal Singh in January 1979 at Ara, Bhojpur.

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trust I had in the police. The Naxalites do annihilate debauched landlords in Bhojpur, but their creed is not to become dacoits. In Chauri, the police treated them as dacoits."[11]

The dichotomy between the evidence and its conclusions recorded by the Commission is quite apparent in the *Report of the Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission.* What appears disconcerting is the rationale the SP elaborated that lay behind the Chauri siege. Under cross-examination the SP indicated how a person should be adjudged a Naxalite. In his statement, he had said that unless a person, including a Naxalite by creed, figured as an accused or suspect in any specific case he could not be arrested. When asked whether he judged a person to be a Naxalite by his action only, the SP answered, "On the whole 'yes', meaning thereby action associated with murder, dacoities, arson etc., because there is no accepted definition of the word Naxalite."[12] The law-and-order police approach had scant respect for the objectivity of an inquiry before taking action. In fact, when the Commission asked K.P. Singh, DSP, "Did the SP express his satisfaction or disapproval at the incidents which took place at Chauri on 6 May 1973?", he blandly replied, "The SP indicated to us that we had tackled a difficult situation and acted with restraint."

That the word 'Naxalite' was used to cover up a heinous massacre was also admitted. M.S. Baghel acknowledged that prior to the District Crime Meeting on 5 May he had not received any information that Chauri was a Naxalite village. Further, the dead and the arrested, had no criminal record so far. The machinations that went on within the four walls of the Commission make more sordid reading. The seizure list was constantly changed to suit police manipulation. It was only after the Commission had gone on for six months that the case diary was sealed. Lawyers representing the landlords and police conferred mutually against those representing the Harijans. None of this came to light.

Long after the event, Aswini Kumar Sinha, reminisces: "What I saw in Chauri that day made my blood boil. Pranav Mukherjee, an SSP man urged me to take the case up. The re-

[11]Interview with Ashwini Kumar Sinha on 25 December 1978.
[12]RCFIC, p. 81.

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muneration I received was a meagre one-fourth of my daily earnings. But nothing happened. The police went scot free: the press told lies: innocent Harijans were arrested: the Commission ended. The episode which began with the molestation of Lalmohar's wife ended in the violent deaths of four Harijans. After Chauri, if a landlord is killed in Bhojpur, the Naxalites are blamed. If a Harijan is killed he is immediately called a Naxalite. I am an old man now. But I will tell you all. I have no faith left in the police any more. You can tell that to the people if you can. I will tell you one more thing. This conflict in Bhojpur will go on. Harijans will not take this lying down any more."

The bulky, closely-printed *Report of the Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission* released in 1976 gave a clean chit to the police. Describing their role in discreet legal jargon it ran, "In the encounter which the police force was faced with in the village, the use of force by the police was properly applied and it was by no means excessive. In the circumstances, there was no question of any member of the police force having indulged in excessive or improper employment of force."

Hints of what was to follow the Chauri genocide came in the concluding paragraph of the report: "The local police officers were not well equipped to deal with the growing menace of Naxalite violence and were treating Naxalite criminals and Naxalite crimes in a conventional fashion as an ordinary law-and-order problem. They were further handicapped by the fact that the Naxalite party was a political party which had not been banned by the government. In fact, the realisation of Naxalite activities in village Chauri requiring a firm line of approach to the problem had come rather too late. Suitable directions and equipments to deal with the situation should have come to the local police from higher authorities, on the lines which were given, about a year later, on the occasion of the raid made by the police in Sonatola."[13]

4 March 1974. When jeeploads of police converged on the outskirts of Sonatola, a miserable village off Berath, Sahar, consisting of sixteen huts, the police were better equipped than at Chauri. Sonatola had been formed by Harijans who had fled

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 189.

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from Berath in order to save themselves from daily harassment by the powerful Rajputs of that village. The mud-and-thatch houses of Sonatola did not house more than a hundred Harijans. Gradually, it became a sanctuary for extremists operating in Sahar and was described as a 'fortress-type' village. Like the threatening 'pill-box' the police discovered in Chauri (which in essence was a small mud chamber with an iron grid window and used for storing mangoes), they described the outer walls of the houses having port-holes, and trenches at its outskirts serving as bunkers.

Over the years, and by 1973, the Harijans of Sonatola had became aware of their rights. Gradual deterioration of relations between Berath and Sonatola created an atmosphere of hate and resentment. Fearing bloodshed, the menfolk hid among the standing crops during the day. In October 1973, Raghunath Dusadh's wife was assaulted severely by the Rajputs when she was returning from the fields after giving food to her husband.

By 1973, extremism had surfaced in Sahar and the Berath landlords apprehended that Sonatola might become a Naxalite sanctuary. Consequently attempts were made by the Rajputs aided by hired hoodlums in February 1974 to tyrannise and coerce the Harijans into submission. The climax came on 3 March 1974 when a cultivator of Berath named Jhulan Singh was murdered in broad daylight near Sonatola while supervising the harvesting of his crops. The news of Jhulan Singh's death and reports of growing tension between Berath and Sonatola provided the rationale behind the Sonatola operation. S.M. Shoeb, DSP, described it in great detail during the Chauri Commission:

"Soon after receipt of news of Jhulan Singh's murder and the discussion in his chamber, the SP sent for me and informed me that I would have to proceed to Sonatola with other officers for the purpose of making a raid. The raiding party started from Ara in different vehicles and assembled at a point one mile away from Sonatola *busti*. The SP also reached that spot in another vehicle. The magistrates also collected at that point. I do not remember the exact number of armed forces that participated in the raid, but it was more than one company (i.e. 100 armed sepoys). Some CRP officers and men were also

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members of the raiding party. Distribution of work under different officers was made at a point about half a mile east of Sonatola. No villager of Berath or any other village was present in our company at that stage. The duty that was assigned to me was on the east of Sonatola. One platoon consisting of about 30 armed sepoys was allotted to me. Similarly other officers were allotted armed force in other directions of Sonatola. One magistrate was present in each platoon of the armed force.

"I cordoned off the *busti* from one point a bit more than 300 yards away from the village. Throughout the night we kept the cordoning off on all the four sides of Sonatola. We took up the work of conducting the search on the following morning. No armed resistance was offered to our force by the local people. It is not a fact that we had arrested each and every adult villager of Sonatola. We had not arrested children, women or old men. We arrested only those male villagers of Sonatola who were found to be hiding. The older people and the women collected before us and told us that they would stay wherever directed to do so. Whereupon we told them to wait at one place when we continued our work inside the *busti*. In all we arrested 28 persons in Sonatola as a result of that raid."

In less than two weeks the press spoke of police successes: 46 underground Naxalites had surrendered either before the police or the SDO.[14]

But there are many details that do not emerge from this otherwise accurate description. The two-day-long cordon of a 18-hut hamlet surpassed any previous paramilitary action in the district. Among those who were seen among the police posses was a former MLA, Suraj Prasad. Further, Mrs Krishna Singh, DM, who is a Rajput, is believed to have exhorted the Rajput landlords of Berath during the Sonatola operation, "It is a shame that your village of Rajputs cannot silence a handful of disobedient Harijans." The DM's Rajput chauvinism was public knowledge—during her tenure nine additional prosecutors, all Rajputs, had been selected by her for the Ara Bar.[15]

Sonatola remains in unrelieved agony to this day, but the inhabitants do not scatter any more when police jeeps stop at the

[14]*The Searchlight*, 15 March 1974.
[15]Interview with Aswini Kumar Sinha cited earlier.

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nearby canal and groups of trigger-happy personnel jog towards the village. An old woman whose son is still in jail recounts the sufferings but does not wince; and the Rajputs of Berath do not sleep in peace any more.

K.D. Singh, SP, when interrogated during the Commission confessed haltingly, "Before handing over charge of Bhojpur district in June 1974 I had prepared a scheme for anti-Naxalite operations for implementation. The said scheme is a confidential matter." 1974 also marked an upswing in extremist activities and 'encounters' took place more than before. That the conventional approach was not working was not only clear, but viewed with concern.

Commission: At the time of handing over charge of the district of Bhojpur were you satisfied that the problem of extremist activities in that district was being satisfactorily tackled?

K.D. Singh: No. My opinion was that the problem was not receiving the full attention that it required.

Commission: Would it be correct to say that the conventional ways of dealing with the law-and-order situation was proving to be inadequate?

K.D. Singh: Yes, I was personally of such an impression that there were some other reasons also why the situation was not being tackled.

Commission: Was one of the causes the inactivity of police officers?

K.D. Singh: I would not call it inactivity of the police. For dealing with the problem of activities a special scheme had been prepared and forwarded to higher authorities for approval. Besides we were also engaged in other serious matters involved in law-and-order problems in the district. The scheme for dealing with Naxalite activities which was prepared by me had not been implemented until I handed over charge of Bhojpur district. The scheme was prepared by me in the same month in which I made over charge of the district, namely June 1974."

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Enter Yogesh Narayan Srivastava. It was after June 1974 that the 'encounters' increased and the Harijan harvest began to pile up. The new SP is credited with major 'kills' in Bhojpur, carried out with aplomb, in particular the shooting at sight on 14 January 1975 of Rameshwar Ahir, one of the top leaders of the Naxalite movement. When Y.N. Srivastava with jeep-loads of paramilitary forces converged on Chandi village in Piro block, Rameshwar Ahir had slipped away to Sonatola. He was tracked down, held hostage and shot at point-blank range by Srivastava.

Aryavarta, a Bihar daily, described the 'encounter,' inadvertently revealing that the much-advertised police-peasant encounter was a lot of eyewash:

"Last Wednesday during night, the SP of Bhojpur, Mr Y.N. Srivastava, killed Rameshwar Ahir after raiding a Naxalite hideout in Sonatola village of Sahar thana. He was killed after being pursued for five kilometres."[16]

No incriminating weapons were found on Rameshwar's person, and he was killed almost in public view at about twelve noon near the Dhamnia culvert, according to his father. Blinded by the flash of cameras, Y.N. Srivastava is believed to have turned to Rameshwar's father while he wept beside his son's corpse and said, "Your son was a true hero."

Extremism continued to grow even after the death of Rameshwar Ahir. Detention of innocent Harijans as 'suspects' and mercy killings brought about an implacable spirit of resistance among the peasants. Ram Sakal Singh, a SSP MLA from the Sahar-Sandesh contituency, confided in an interview, "The police and the law courts will preserve Naxalism in this district in their desire to stamp it out." The long trail of Harijan blood from Chauri seeped into the ricefields and hamlets of Sonatola, Hanuman-Chapra, Bahuara, Babubandh, Pinjrohi and countless other villages of Bhojpur. Patna-Ara trains unloading Bhojpur-bound paramilitary forces did not cease either.

On 23 May 1975, B.N. Sinha, DIG Police (Central Range), elaborated on the counter-insurgency strategy for Bhojpur and its adjoining districts: In order to bring the Naxalite menace to an end, police personnel have been alerted in five districts, namely Gaya, Nalanda, Patna, Bhojpur and Rohtas. Police

[16] *Aryavarta*, 20 January 1975.

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officers in all thanas of these districts have been instructed to confiscate illegal arms. The police also declared that they were hunting about thirty-five Naxalite leaders operating in Patna, Bhojpur and Nalanda districts. The press note concluded optimistically, "The situation is under full control."[17] The police saw it grow with alarm: by now they were claiming that Naxalites from Bhojpur had set up training centres in Gazipur and Ballia districts of Uttar Pradesh.

Within a week another press note was issued. On 28 May 1975 Shivaji Prasad Singh, DIG (Naxalites), made a brief announcement, "The Bihar government has decided to arm all able-bodied persons in Bhojpur and Patna districts for self-defence to face the extremist menace who have recently launched an armed struggle." He added, "District magistrates of both the districts have been asked to visit the affected villages and issue licences for firearms on the spot to those who were able to possess them. . . .the decision was taken following a spurt in the armed attack on landowners by the extremists in these villages. The trouble was mostly of agrarian nature."[18]

That mopping-up operations in these areas were on was also stated. In fact, by the summer of 1975, jeeploads of CRP men surrounding villages in the early hours for 'suspects' had become a common experience in rural Bhojpur. The Bihar Students Association (BSA)[19] condemned the government move.

The events in Pinjrohi, Sandesh, made things clearer. After the carnage, the Harijans pleaded, "May it be recalled, when the country was under British regime it was held that a person in uniform be he officer, NCO, or private, is no more than any one else entitled to assault other subjects of the King whether in peace or in times of war. Now during our this day of Independence, there has been pronouncement also by the Supreme Court of our land that law is no respector of persons or personalities. Today, when poor people and Harijans are supposed to be entitled to equal protection under the constitution, the episode in village Pinjrohi, PS Sandesh, is all the more shocking."

[17] *The Indian Nation*, 24 May 1975.
[18] *Ibid.*, 28 May 1975.
[19] *Ibid.*, 30 May 1975.

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In the early hours of 3 December 1975, acting on so-called information that a few Naxalites were intending to hold a meeting to spread their depredation, the armed police surrounded the Chamartoli of village Pinjrohi and asked the inhabitants to come out of their houses with their hands up. The meek and mild inhabitants obeyed this order and were then handcuffed and held in a nearby garden.

One Ramdayal Chamar who declined to leave his house and dared to be at his door, was abused and roughly handled by a young policeman. He protested. At this one policeman poked his bayonet into his abdomen and he raised a piteous cry. His two children, Harishankar Chamar and Shanker Chamar, aged 14 and 15, came out of the house and frantically looked around for a way to escape. For no reason, the boys were shot to death. Since nothing incriminating was recovered, there could be no reason to believe that they were posing any danger or menace to public security.

The few females who were hiding were so terrified that they hesitated to come out when the police called. They too were made a target by the cruel hunters. There was no mercy although they raised their trembling hands and begged for their lives. The one male, who had remained behind was also put to death, being dubbed a Naxalite. He was Jawahar Chamar, a relative of Ramdayal.

The handcuffed Chamars were put behind bars. They were implicated in as many as fourteen offences under the penal code and there was opposition to their release on bail. Among them were even boys—Jaikumar, aged 13 years, and Ramupadhyay, agen 14 years.

From the FIR registerad by M.D. Azim one can very easily make out that it was a trumped-up case. The police are supposed to have received information about Naxalite operations in the village from an unknown person. The opponents are supposed to have used fire-arms indiscriminately and to substantiate this some firearms were produced with scratch-marks to identify them. It was further alleged that as they drew closer, they brandished swords which caused injuries. It was nowhere explained why those who had fire-arms should resort to lathis or swords. It was also alleged that some miscreants were not apprehended because they escaped through a lane.

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But there is no lane, and how could anyone escape in broad daylight when there was already a strong cordon all round?

Behind the closed door of Ramdayal's hut, three women and one man sat closely huddled to each other. There was no way to escape. The police lingered outside for a while. A few minutes earlier they had killed Ramdayal. The bloody corpses of his two sons lay at a small distance. While rifle shots continued to rend the air more contingents arrived. Ramdayal had been killed without much ado. But the door of his hut remained closed. The police finding that their entrance was barred scrambled onto the roof.

In the orchard the old men and women kept urging the police to restrain themselves but to no avail. Three women emerged when the police finally broke through the door. In the hail of bullets two of them slumped to the ground while another lay writhing in pain. The two who died were the daughter-in-law of Teniram and the wife of Anantlal Gupta, a wanted Naxalite. Jawahar Chamar, a relative of Ramdayal, could not escape either. He too was on the 'wanted' lists. Soon after, six bullet-ridden corpses and the seriously injured Radhikadevi were stashed in a jeep bound for Ara Sadar Hospital. The entire carnage had taken less than an hour. Among those who remained in the orchard, six were arrested and the rest released.

Some months later at the request of Baliram Bhagat, MP, and a section of people from Pinjrohi, those who had been arrested were released on bail with more than half a dozen cases hanging on their head. The process of getting them out on bail was harrowing for their relatives and in particular for the kith and kin of seventy five-year-old Dharikshan Chamar who was kept in chains like the others while in jail. Long after the Pinjrohi killings the District Magistrate visited the area and assured the villagers that relief would be provided. Nagina Ram of Pinjrohi ran from pillar to post after this government assurance but nothing happened. The broken house of Ramdayal Chamar remains in ruin to this day. The police confiscated every single piece of furniture like a marauding army of occupation. At that time the emergency was on and publication of such news or any protest was out of the question. Pinjrohi went unheard, unwept.

1975 was the bloodiest year in Bhojpur. Despite being

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shaken by the death of Rameshwar Ahir on 14 January 1975, the Naxalites showed no signs of relenting. In Patna, the top brass of the police gathered at hastily arranged press conferences to dispel suspicions that police morale was desperately low. Soon after the police-extremist encounter in Dullamchak, Sahar, in the first week of June the big four in police and administrative circles—Fahimmuddin Ahmed, Badri Narayan Sinha, DIG (Naxalite), Kabir Kumar Khan, DM of Bhojpur, and Y.N. Srivastava, the SP of the district—met the press.

B.N. Sinha, the erudite and knowledgeable police chief, noted that ever since the snatching of arms at Garhani, Piro, the extremist movement had spread alarmingly. In 1971 the Naxalites murdered 4 people, in 1972—2, 1973—2, 1974—33 and by the end of May 1975 they had already claimed 8 lives. In response the police had arrested 57 Naxalites in 1974 and by the end of March 1975 arrested 22 and killed 6. Disagreeing with the popular belief that it was in essence a caste war between the forward and backward castes Sinha said that it was a political movement with the ideology of the Maoist leader Charu Mazumdar, which had spread "from Naxalbari to Ekwari"—to use Sinha's own phrase. To see merely socio-economic causes behind the movement would be wrong, because many of the Harijans in Sahar were not poor. He specially mentioned the MLA Rajdeo Ram, a Harijan with considerable property and known anti-Naxalite views.

In response to the extremist advance in the district, police actions, arrests etc. increased. By the third week of June 1975 the police claimed to have captured 6 rifles, 8 muskets, 4 Assamese rifles, 23 country-made guns, 16 bombs, 7 grenades, 141 cartridges, 37 rifle bullets and lots of Naxalite literature. 169 people had been arrested and 13 killed. By the end of June, 4 companies of armed police had been stationed in four Bhojpur thanas; the posting points were Ekwari and Agiaon in Sahar, Garhani in Piro and Sikrahatta and Tarari in Sandesh, and Nawanagar. Another company had been kept in reserve. Since the outbreak of extremism the police had a lot to show in terms of hard work. Since 1972, they claimed to have arrested 198 Naxalites and killed 19; and the Naxalites, according to them, had killed 3 police personnel and snatched 13 rifles.

On their part the police were also taking steps to bolster

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up the sagging morale of its personnel. With the support from the state administration, they announced a grant of Rs 10,000 to the next of kin of the constable who was killed by the Naxalites in the encounter at Dullamchak, Sahar, on 21 May 1975. The state sought many other means of regaining its lost prestige and dignity in the eyes of Bhojpur's Harijans. After the landlord massacre at Hadiabad, Jagdishpur, on 2 June 1975 they arrested 18 landlords. In the presence of the DM, Kabir Kumar Khan, and the SP, Y.N. Srivastava, bags of rice from landlord's houses were distributed to the bereaved Harijans. Later that same year the DM Kusheswar Jha distributed 356 acres of contested *diara* land to the Harijans and Ahirs of Phoolari, Sandesh—2½ acres went to the widow of Jhapasi Jadhav, who had been killed in action against their attack on the Naxalites.[20]

1975 marked the bloodiest year for Harijans. The police-peasant 'encounters' in Hanuman Chapra, Piro, on 3 April, Dullamchak, Sahar, on 14 April, 2 July at Bahuara, Sahar, and Babubandh, Sahar, on 28 November left a lingering trail of blood. "Operation Thunder" threw its trigger-happy jawans into countless hamlets of rural Bhojpur in an unprecedented search-and-eliminate mayhem. B.N. Sinha stated on 23 May 1975 that special attention was being paid to the district border from Hilsa in Nalanda district to Nawanagar in Bhojpur and Nasriganj in Rohtas district.[21]

There was also a euphemistic attempt to describe landlord-syndicates as 'people's resistance squads' which were springing up to contain the movement. The dark curtain of the Emergency presented more massacres from coming to light. While Bhojpur rocked under this onslaught, similar outrages were perpetrated in the contiguous district of Patna.

On 3 June 1975 SI Samant Singh machine-gunned fifteen Naxalites in the village of Gaharuawan about five kilometres north-west of Masaurhi block.[22] The figures which the police fed the press occasionally were incredibly low compared to the real number of 'kills' scored in the countryside. In fact, one of

[20]*The Indian Nation*, 2 December 1975.
[21]*Ibid.*, 24 May 1975.
[22]*The Searchlight*, 5 June 1975.

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the responses recollected by an inquisitive reporter who visited the village of Bahuara in Sahar after the prolonged battle between the police and the extremists was lurid. The SI turned to him and said, "Had it not been for the government tripe about Harijans, we would have set the entire village on blazes."

Over the years the 'encounter' stories grew but did not wash any more. By the end of 1979 police camps in landlord houses dotted the Sahar countryside and the camp at Garhani was replenished with more men and guns. By this time landlord syndicates had sprung up and had aided the police on several occasions. The press in Patna even described the innocent Harijans at Gurpa village in Sahar block killed by the hands of landlords as 'Naxalites'.[23] But time was running out and the people who remained behind long after their sons and husbands or daughters and wives were shot or arrested were no longer willing to take things lying down.

Pakri Chawk,
Arrah.
14-12-77

Dear Lok Nayak Sri Jayaprakash Narayan Jee,

My greetings.

After tortures and tribulations of nineteen long months of Emergency our countrymen heaved a breath of relief. Period of suffocation was over and people expected to breathe in pure and fresh air of freedom; shackles of bondage loosened and at last fell down from the limbs of the people. Credit goes to you in great measure in having brought the Janata Party recognition of the world in its full stature. Nobody can deny it.

Sir, when you were released from the jail, people thought that their Messiah had returned alive from the Cross. Mental state of the people in the Lok Sabha and the Assembly elections was such that when a single Janata candidate lost people thought it their personal loss. After the Janata

[23]*The Indian Nation*, 13 March 1977.

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Party was returned in the elections we thought that India was going to write a new history.

The first step that the Janata government took was to grant amnesty to all Naxalite and Anand Margi criminals who once had played havoc in the country. The government with your mind believed that they were completely transformed men and women since heaven had descended to earth with the advent of the Janata government. After a few months of the Janata government in office the country took a sharp turn. Commodities either disappeared from the market or their prices hiked beyond the reach of common men. Crime figures throughout the length and breadth of the country shot up, strikes and lockouts reincarnated, government employees in all section began to shout their old insatiable demands, taxes on the peasantry heightened, examinations again became free from strains and study, sky boomed with police firing, every murder with whatsoever reason committed was coined to be atrocity on the Harijans and the weaker section, ministers borrowed cloaks of lies and falsehood from their predecessors, officials became more corrupt than before, nepotism grew like weeds and legislators are reported to take recourse to bamboo staff than to solve problems by peaceful discussions.

This is how the first leaf of history of the newly freed India was written.

Dear Sir, you know that every radio broadcast and every newspaper quote some leader either of the Janata Party or of the Congress speaking on the common topic of atrocities on Harijans and weaker section. Leaders of each party exclusively claim to be the saviours of the Harijans and the weaker section of the people, but practically they do nothing for them than making wide publicity. In this race one party tries to beat down the other, while in power the Congress also had tried to appease the Harijans with such slogans but the Harijans did not fail to recognise the tune and when time came they kicked the Congress out of gear. Would the result be different with the Janata government?

Sir, in 1974 you had gone to Sahar and some villages in its compass. You must have known who killed whom or who committed atrocities on whom. But it was always called

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atrocities on Harijans although people other than Harijans died. Perhaps you still remember killings of Ekwari, Chauri, Dullamchak, Fulari, Dehri, Bansi-Dehri, Berath, Gurpa and some other villages. Only innocent members of the so-called upper class were the victims. When police took actions against the Naxalites in village Chauri, your disciples cried hoarse against the police so much so that Sri Karpoori Thakur undertook a fast unto death until the detenus of the Chauri murders were released from the jail custody. At his insistence murderers of the Chauri episode were released and a judicial probe was appointed. The Commission after a prolonged inquiry gave its verdict to the chagrin of Mr Thakur.

Since Naxalites have been set free at your behest they are again out in marauding bands and have almost every day a good number of kills. They do not repent for their past actions nor do they make secret of their programmes. They openly assert to change the society by killing the members of the so-called *Bara Jati*. Fresh murders have been committed at Baghi, Didua and Kesath in Bhojpur district. Do you not know this or knowingly turn your face from the truth? I believe you know that Naxalites are nobody else than your beloved Harijans for whose sake you plead for dissolution of the caste system. In Sherpur episode of the Ghajipur district murders were started by the Harijans of the village which when retaliated by the upper-caste men you came out with a cudgel in your hand and made a number of incendiary statements on behalf of the Harijans. There you had completely forgotten truth and justice.

Mr Karpoori Thakur, now the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Bihar, has awarded compensation of Rs 5,000 to each family of the victims of Belchi.[24] There have been numerous killings in Sahar, Sandesh and Tarari areas of the Bhojpur district. How many families there have been given such compensations? Sir, is there difference between the life of a Harijan and that of a member of the so-called *Bara Jati*? But it seems so in your and that of your disciples' estimate. If one Harijan is killed, though of his personal conduct or

[24]Scene of a Harijan massacre in 1977 in Patna district of Bihar.

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in police action, you and your disciples rush out with furious statements but you do not regard at all when a large number of men of the so-called upper class are hacked to pieces by the Naxalites.

Sir, you have given a clarion call for a class war which in the plain language we mean decimation. You too mean the same but apparently interpret it in terms of non-violence. Your call for class war and interpretation of non-violence have no compatibility. You know that oppressed cannot remain oppressed for a long time. Some day they must rise and organise and prepare themselves to meet your challenge. Then only you can understand the true meaning of the language that you speak today.

Sir, you uphold the cause of the judiciary. You condemned supercession of senior judges when Sri A.N. Roy was made the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. But what happens today? A junior Judge of the Gujarat High Court had been elevated to the bench of the Supreme Court, bypassing the two senior judges out of whom one has resigned in protest. But why are you silent now? Do you not feel that the Janata government writes the history of the country with the same pen and ink and probably on the same paper which the Congress government left behind? You know that the Janata government, specially in Bihar, has become a den of evils, yet you defend it saying that it has no magic wand to cure the evils in a day. When Mrs Indira Gandhi ruled the country, you found India littered with evils. Since the party of your creation rules this country you find the land strewn with rose petals. Perhaps this is your feeling.

Sir, we believe that you are an impartial man, having no lust for power. We expect you will do justice to all alike.

Sincerely yours,
RAJ KISHORE SINGH
Advocate, Arrah.

Sent to Shri Jayaprakash Narayan on 14 December 1977

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The landlords and their *latheiths* could not remain passive victims for long. Between the annihilation of Sheopujan Singh, a five-bigha-landlord of Ekwari, Sahar, on 23 March 1971 and the Narahi-Chandi, Ara Mofussil, violence on 3 January 1979 eight years of a long war have elapsed, and the relentles struggle unleashed by squads of roving guerillas on debauched landlords and their blustering *latheiths* shows no signs of waning. The killing of major tyrants like Hari Singh, Thana Singh, Jagdish Singh and Muninath complete a time-worn aphorism: A violent man shall die a violent death. In the wake of this armed struggle, Rajput and Bhumihar landlords, wary of restive labourers, have organised themselves into armed syndicates, quick on the kill.

That the landlords would cooperate with the forces of state in this programme of containment was absolutely clear after Chauri; the response evoked by the mysterious letter of *Ek Bhaibhit Gramin*, a landlord's request for assistance, in the hearts of government officials was clear after the Chauri killings. Afrer Chauri an implicit cord of trust bound the landlords to the state, and the Harijan blood that continued to flow after Chauri in the hamlets of Hadiabad, Gurpa, Sonatola and others was the enactment of a permanent landlord-police nexus.

It was even alleged that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) were assisting in the setting up of training centres for high-caste landlords at Berath, Baghi and Ekwari in Sahar block in 1974. At Ara a 'Kuar Sena' office was opened around 1974-75, its chairman — Bir Bahadur Singh. Their objective — terrorising restive peasants. The Kuar Sena allegedly had a hand in the massacres at Berath and Ekwari in Sahar block and Phoolari in the Block of Sandesh.

On 28 May 1975, Shivaji Prasad Singh, DIG (Naxalite), announced that the Bihar government had decided to arm all able-bodied persons in Bhojpur and Patna districts for self-defence in order to face extremist menace.[25] One week earlier B.N. Sinha, DIG (Police) Central Range, had confirmed that orders had been given to all police officers at the than a level to confiscate unlicensed weapons in the wake of unprecedented snatching of arms by extremists in the districts of Bhojpur,

[25]*The Indian Nation*, 30 May 1975.

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Nalanda, Rohtas and Gaya. And by late 1975, Jagannath Mishra, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, made an unpublicised visit to Bhojpur to inaugurate a 'firing-and-shooting centre' for landlords[26] and their sons.

The unrestrained granting of gun licences to landlords on the other hand helped substantially in providing them with more muscle. In practice, the District Magistrate is the licensing authority for guns. Applications for gun licences are filed before the SDO who refers them for report. They go back to the SDO who then forwards them to the DM for final order. That was the procedure, according to K.D. Singh, SP during his time. He confessed, however, before the Chauri Commission that subsequently the procedure was slightly changed when Mrs. Krishna Singh joined as District Magistrate. K.D. Singh confessed, "Sometimes she used to send such applications to me for report and opinion and in that way lots of gun licence applications used to be received in my office during my time.[27] The accumulation of guns, mostly in the hands of landlords, is vouched for by public figures. The codeword for this bizarre build-up, was '*gohaar*' (clarion call)—a call for all upper-caste landed gentry to unite.

While at places like Chauri, Sonatola and Babubandh in Sahar block landlords united openly, at Hadiabad and Gurpa the police aided landlord actions by tacit connivance. The carnage at Hadiabad proved beyond doubt that landlords were in no mood to take the growing peasant resentment lying down. On 2 June 1975 the landlords of Hadiabad in Jagdishpur block went on a rampage. Nirmohi Ram, who lodged the FIR, named 60 landowners, mostly of Haidabad, who had indulged in the arson. He said a few landowners of two adjacent villages, Ayar and Ratanpur, were also involved. Altogether 46 persons were held in this connection. On being asked what he thought could be the reason behind this attack, Nirmohi replied, "*Ye wakna ki karpe hum na kah saki Hadiabadke log se adawat pahele se awat ba.*"[28] Police sources admitted that it was not the first anti-

[26] *Samayik Varta*, a soclalist journal published from Patna.

[27] RCFIC.

[28] The reasons are unclear but the upper caste of Hadiabad were preparing for long.

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Naxalite operation by the landlords of Hadiabad—earlier on 26 March 1975 they had burnt Rambiswas Mahto, suspected to be a Naxalite, to death.

Landlord depredations in and around the villages of Jagdishpur block were not only limited to Harijan-hunting. Attempts of agricultural labourers to stand on their own feet and become self-reliant were viewed with equal fury. The Sohngi incident revealed this clearly. In Sohngi, a village in Jagdishpur block, lay a plot of eight bighas called 'temple land' dedicated to Kshitiswar Bhagwan. The temple premises were under the ownership of a sect of *sadhus* from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. The land was being tilled by Dusadhs, Chamars and Jadhavs who had been 2-5 bigha sharecroppers on that land since 1912. When the *sadhus* gave up the temple and left in 1974-75, it passed into the ownership of Sachida Prasad, an Arrah laywer.

Rama Singh, a Rajput landlord of the area, had had his eye on that land for a long time. He would keep coercing the Jadhavs, Dusadhs and Chamars who still remained sharecroppers on that land to give up their plots. By 1977 signs of Jadhav entrepreneurship appeared even more irksome to him. Sampat and Girja Jadhav, two Ahir brothers, had stirred the imagination of their brethren in Sohngi. They persuaded the other sharecroppers to raise funds and buy a common pumping set for their benefit; consequently, the Jadhav brothers mortgaged their two-and-a-half-bigha plot and with common funds bought a pumping set worth five thousand rupees.

In the past, these labourers had refused to give in to Rama Singh's dictates. One night, a gang of twenty armed mercenaries commanded by Rama Singh arrived at the pumping set site and lifted it away. The labourers remained impotent witnesses. To this day the villagers of Sohngi have not found any justice. Petitions and litigation have eaten away at their earnings without improving their plight.

In 1976, Banarsi Devi Gupta, a woman organiser of agricultural labourers of Bhojpur, came to acquaint the villagers of Sohngi and the neighbouring hamlets of Icchri, Hadiabad and Barnau about the government regulation regarding minimum wages. One Dusadh labourer, Bisheswar, was asked by his employer Rambachan Singh not to leave his work to attend the

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meeting. When he returned from the Sohngi meeting Bisheswar was aghast to find that his *kola* had been harvested.

The word of Rama Singh is even more powerful than that of his forebear in the area, Thana Singh.

Every labourer who gets into an altercation with his employer sleeps uneasily, in fear that the landlord goons of Ayyar-Icchri-Hadiabad will get him sooner or later.

From 1972 Hadiabad, a large village of 1600 people, had begun to simmer. 800 of the 1000 bighas of land lay in the hands of a hundred Rajput families; among the backward castes the Ahirs, fifteen families, were better off than the rest. The only redeeming feature in Hadiabad was that more than 60 per cent of the population had some formal education. When Jagdish Mahto and his small band were scouring the Bhojpur villages they met a Kurmi named Fagu Mahto, who was disgusted by the Rajput habit of raping lower caste women. After Jagdish Mahto's death in December 1972, the villages around Hadiabad began to hear and see more of Fagu Mahto.

In Hadiabad, by this time, a certain tension was growing between the Rajputs and the most numerically dominant backward caste of the village, the Ahirs. Soon Yadu Jadhav and Bhuar Jadav were beaten up by the Rajputs. When the scuffle was on, Haridwar Yadav, another Ahir, is believed to have threatened Rampravesh Singh, one of the assaulting Rajputs, with severe consequences. In the meantime the 7-8 bigha *mukhiya* Jagdish Singh and his son reached the spot and peace was temporarily restored. But the trouble did not end there.

The Chamars were getting increasingly restive. Later, the police began to suspect that at least a dozen young men, mostly Harijans, had begun to listen and follow the 30-year-old science graduate of Agiaon village, Piro—Fagu Mahto.

He openly asked them to fight for the honour of their women. Fagu's visits to the village raised fears in the mind of the landlords; with the help of their *mukhiya*, who was their casteman they apprehended Fagu in June 1974. Badri Chamar tried to get him out of the chowkidar's clutches by saying that he was an uncle of his. But this ruse did not work. At Fagu's insistence they removed the ropes around his hands. The *mukhiya* tried to placate him by asking him for a meal. Fagu refused. Later, at his insistence, when the *mukhiya* took him into the

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interior of his house—an acknowledgement of respect—Fagu complied, and was let scot free. His release was only possible after the *mukhiya* entreated the police to let him go. But Fagu never forgave him.

On the night of 11 August 1974 a group of Harijans attacked the *mukhiya* and his son near their boring pump, close to the Harijantola. Umesh was injured and lay in hospital for months. The *mukhiya's* corpse was found in the well. In the FIR filled by Puran Gaderi, the chowkidar, there figured no accused, but 11 persons were named by the wounded Umesh Singh who lay in hospital. They were the wounded Laxman Chamar, Maheshwar, Narayan, Badri Ram, Nirmohi Ram, 15-year-old Medunath Ram, fifteen-year-old Rajendra Ram, Dular Ram, Bhuteli Ram, Ramnath Ram and Duryadhan Ram. In the 4th session trial K.D. Sharma sentenced six of them to life imprisonment. All of this was a consequence of the 8(8)74 Jagdishpur case that was filed.

The police officer Kameshwar Singh, SI, implicated several of them as being in possession of explosive substances. Another case filed on 10(8)74 under section 25 of Arms Act involved Dhanpat Ram, Rajendra Ram, Moti Ram, Bhikhari Ram, Jindar Ram and Dular Ram. They were detained up to December 1977 and subsequently released on bail under the amnesty for Naxalites. None have gone undergrund.

Laxman Chamar who was seriously injured and admitted to the Sadar Hospital, Ara, had a different story to tell. On that night, he stated, he was hurt by a thrown javelin when he left his hut to go to the bathroom. Further, there were no witnesses who claimed to have seen the *mukhiya* incident or recognised the culprits. Not even the chowkidar. Rumours have it that Umesh Singh and the Rajput SI collaborated in framing all those who had become restive of late.

The landlords were in no mood to relent following the murder of their caste *mukhiya*, Jagdish Singh. On 18 September 1973 Shivnarayan Singh and Bahadur Singh caught the buffalo of Darbi Devi, wife of the detained Moti Ram, and cut off its tail. She ran from pillar to post with the tail, but got no response from any policeman or administrative officer. Tension began to mount in Hadiabad and the gulf between the castes began to widen. Gradually a landlord caucus was formed con-

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sisting of the big landowners of the Rajput-dominated villages of Ayar, Semraon, Barnau, Icchri and Ratanpur.

On 26 March 1975, a group of landlords, apprehended 16-year-old Rambiswas Mahto who was bathing at the tube-pump and after beating him, threw him on a haystack and set it on fire. He was an associate of Nirmohi Ram and Bhuteli Chamar. The entreaties of the mother of Bahadur Singh, a village elder, fell on deaf ears. Grief-stricken, the mother of Rambiswas who witnessed this gory incident at 11 in the morning ran to the police station at Garhani. But by the time help came Ramiswas's body had been reduced to cinders. The witnesses, Ritan and Bhuwar Yadav, explained that a complaint was filed implicating 23, notably Banbahadur Singh, Saheb Singh, Rangbahadur Singh, Jwala Singh and Ram Chandra Singh. The mother of Rambiswas was packed off to her home by the villagers; her husband was long dead and she had no one, except her son.

Hadiabad's day of reckoning was not far off. The landlords of Ayar, Icchri, Barnau and Semraon razed the Chamartoli of Hadiabad to the ground on the morning of 2 July. It is alleged that Surendra Singh and Rambaran Singh led the attackers.

This atmosphere of violence had been building up. The previous day they had fired on the Chamartoli for 4 hours. Hearing the shots the Chamars who fled in terror to the Chamartoli of the nearby Bharesia village had informed the police. Two constables who were accosted by them on the road to Lalganj police station responded helplessly: "What can two sipahis with one revolver do?"—and continued on their way. The FIR that Nirmohi Ram lodged named many of the landlords who were directly involved in the Hadiabad carnage the following day.

The carnage is alleged to have taken place in the presence of 10-12 police personnel, if the Jagdishpur case 6.7.8.(8)74 is to be believed. Those Harijans who witnessed it claim that Kameswar Singh, the SP, gazed on in bemused excitement and never asked his men to fire on the attackers even once. For 26 hours Hadiabad became an inextinguishable inferno. Till today sixty bighas of land lie unused and vacant. It belonged to the Harijans who fled the village that day, and never returned.

To Fagu Mahto the incident did not come as a surprise. On

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11 June Ram Ratan Ram, Jail Minister, visited the Ara Jail. He asked Fagu Mahto, "Do you know the Harijantoli was attacked and subjected to arson by the Hadiabad landlords on June 2 ?" Fagu snapped back, "What is there to know? This is not a new thing in society. The poor and landless are not in a position to save their prestige and it is for them to rise to the occasion and defend their honour by all means."

Shortly after the lifting of the Emergency, the landlord outrage at Gurpa village in Sahar block on 11 March 1977 made it clear that landlords and police continued to cooperate even after Chauri.

24 Bhumihar households control more than 50 per cent of the land resources, apart from having access to irrigation facilities like tubewells, while the other major landowning caste—22 Ahir families (barring 10 per cent) despite owning some land eke out a precarious existence, after paying assorted taxes and sharecropping returns. Five houses of Dusadhs make up the rest of the backward caste population. Almost all the Harijans are educated, but landless.

Despite underlying caste tensions, Gurpa remained tranquil, until one night some Bhumihars tending to the harvested crops at night were fired upon. Though people say that the shots were fired by itinerant miscreants, the Bhumihars suspected the Ahirs because the sounds were heard from the southern fringe of the village where they lived. Consequently, the wounded Bhumihars, Ram Ekbal Pande and Kedar Pande, framed Ranganath Ahir, Shivkumar Ahir, Bhadai Ahir, Mohar Ahir, Lalmohar Ahir, Ramayan Ahir and others in a criminal case. This event marked the beginning of a growing rift between the opposing castes.

Shortly after, on 27 June 1976 some land belonging to a Bhumihar landlord, Ram Bahal Pande, was declared surplus by the promulgation and subsequent implementation of the 20 point programme. Accordingly, it was to legally pass into the ownership of Bhadai Ahir, the sharecropper, who had been tilling the land for the last seven years. That very day at about 6 p.m. a group of Bhumihars descended with javelins and lathis, on Mohan, Kukar and Shivaji Ahir who had already started tilling the land. They were seriously injured and admitted to Ara Sadar Hospital. In the wake of this act of violence, the Ahirs implicated Rambahal Pande, Kamla Pande, Harihar Pande, Rama-

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dhari Pande and Gopi Pande in a criminal case of attempted marder. But that there were ominous signs of more violence to come was conveyed by Gopi Pande's message to the Harijans from jail. While in detention, he swore, "The day I am released I will obliterate the word 'Harijan' from the face of Gurpa."

By the time the accused Bhumihars returned to the village the barrier between the upper and backward castes had become an insurmountable wall of open hatred. Less than two months later, thirty acres of land belonging to Dharam Pande, the most feared and propertied landlord of Gurpa, was declared surplus. The change of ownership to this effect had already been announced and Kailash Ram, the Ahir *sarpanch*, had procured the title deeds for the concerned Harijans. But no one dared claim physical control over Dharam Pande's land, because the assault on Bhadai Ahir was fresh in their memory.

On 8 August 1976 the district officials ordered Dharam Pande to give up the surplus land. At Gurpa, however, no one dared come up and claim ownership though title deeds were in their hands.

A few days later, on 11 August, an unprecedented action took place. A group of unidentified persons entered Gurpa around 7 p.m. in the evening and shot to death Gopi, Avadhbehari, Jagannath, Singhaldeep Pande and Jagdish Pande. All died on the spot, barring Singhaldeep who expired on the way to hospital the next day. Some others were injured. The action was dramatic; the assailants could not be identified because they were dressed in police uniform and the Bhumihars had been taken totally unawares. Before they could put up a defence, the assailants shouting 'Naxalbari Zindabad' had dlsappeared in the cover of darkness.

The following day when members of the Bhumihar bereaved were carrring the dead to an Ara-bound bus, they accosted Chandramani Yadav, the village *chowkidar*, who in turn was going to file the report of the last night's event. Frightened bystanders saw one of the Bhumihars shoot him dead at close range. It was only 7 a.m. then. The killing of the Bhumihars was interpreted by the police as a Naxalite action and conjectures were made that the weak Ahirs had connived and possibly invited the Naxalites to take revenge. Subsequently 26 arrests were made and a police force posted at the village. The police camped on

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the rooftop of Tapeswar Pande's house in open co-operation with the Bhumihars.

Following the lifting of the Emergency and the imminent elections in 1977, the police force was all of a sudden withdrawn and left Gurpa on 11 March 1977. While leaving the village some of the personel told various bystanders in the Harijan quarters : "*Aaj Holi hoga.*" The sentence aroused dormant suspicions among the hearers. Holi was approaching and it hinted at the sprinkling of blood. The Bhumihars escorted the police to the outskirts of the village and bade them a long farewell. The departure of the police from Gurpa that day was not coincidental, as future events were to prove.

At about 5 p.m. only a few hours after the police had left, shots were heard and amidst screams and belligerent cries a mob of 25-30 Bhumihars armed with lethal weapons like rifles, swords and javelins stormed the Harijan quarters of the village. The residents quailed and fled in terror. Kailash Ram, the *sarpanch*, escaped into a room for safety. He was panting and nervous.

He had been the *sarpanch* of Gurpa for the last fourteen years. Kailash Ram, who has a heavily lined face and deep-set eyes, still becomes nervous when he describes the events of that day. His voice begins to crack and quiver. He had taken a key role in distributing the *purchas* to the new owners of the surplus lands; and thus earned the unanimous hatred of the Bhumihar community.

While Kailash Ram trembled behind the closed door of the house, two women who had escaped from the wrath of the advancing mob entered in haste. Then the sound of a cracker was heard setting the straw roof on fire, Outside, screams filled the air along with the acrid smoke. Some voices were heard commenting, "They are burning inside." Somehow in the darkness and noise Kailash Ram escaped and thus survived. By that time the carnage was nearly complete and Hiraman Kumhar, Kali Tato and Dipan Jadhav, all septuagenarians and too old to flee, had been burnt to death. Two women who were returning from the fields had been reduced to ashes. 45-year-old Tijiya Devi and 24-year-old, pregnant Phulkumari had been caught and set on fire.

Days later, Gurpa's half-charred huts bore witness to what

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had happened. The burning went on for a couple of hours. When the police arrived at eleven p.m. it was all over. But the fire smouldered for three days before it died down. Fifteen persons were arrested. 4 guns and 7 rifles and about 2000 cartridges were recovered. More distressing facts were revealed later : none of those burnt and killed had been implicated in earlier cases of crime. They were totally innocent and belonged to the Harijan community.

Gurpa was part of a general offensive by the landlords of Belaur, Sandesh, Bagar and Berath in Sahar, to silence the restive populations through sheer terror. Police connivance was obvious. When Kailash Ram urged S.N. Gupta, the SP of Bhojpur, to seize the weapons of Raghubans Pande, he promised help but to this day no seizure has been made. Guns have multiplied in the hands of the Bhumihars and the scions of Gopi Pande are still on the prowl for Harijans. Kailash Ram says, "We are like sparrows to them. And they are after us."

The word Gurpa has gone into peasant memory as a landlord codeword for unbridled vendetta. A faw months back the landlords of Chauri warned restive labourers; "*Gurpa yaad rakhana.*" B.N. Sinha's euphemistic explanation in 1975, that "people had started forming resistance groups" was in fact a sustained *gohaar* by the landlords of rural Bhojpur, in order to stamp out any resistance by agricultural labourers and poor peasants.

"As for the law-and-order aspect of Naxalism it is my view that it should be solely the concern of the government, which alone has the resources to protect the lives and property of the citizens. I believe that any encouragement to organise private armed resistance to Naxalism, especially in the context of a weak government, is fraught with the danger of eventual escalation into civil war. But, while the government must do its duty, let no one forget that no amount of arrests, imprisonments, and shootings can put down Naxalism or any other kind of revolutionary violence, unless at the same time the remedy is applied to the roots. In this latter effort, of course, the government, political parties, social and Gandhian workers can all make a significant contribution."

—JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN, *Face to Face*

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"Of the counter-insurgency measures the following are the usual ones: concentrated police operations or operations by the special task forces, maybe from the supreme armed formation, the army itself; simultaneous survey operations cataloguing all maladies area-wise and irrespective of any political or, in the context of Bihar, caste affiliations, and undertaking administrative steps to remove these maladies in toto; putting in zealous and dedicated social reformers drawn from all shades to bring about transformation on the socio-cultural planes; for military defeat of the guerilla is not enough nor can be an end in itself and bringing in drastic legislation to stamp out all social injustice and last but not the least, sending properly oriented personnel at all levels and in all spheres of the government to the areas to pursue and co-ordinate all activities. Where the task of the police ends the tasks of other agencies soon begin for the political vacuum is immediately filled up with progressive programmes. At this stage the police or security forces are quartered in minimum merely to enforce law and the rest withdraw to the barracks."

—B.N. SINHA, IPS, *From the Gun to the Sun*

The role of the Sarvodaya in collaborating, openly or covertly, with the government to stem the tide of agrarian conflict in Bihar is not without precedent. Soon after the Naxalbari events in north Bengal, Maoist penetration into north Bihar in particular signified that the movement had moved beyond the borders of West Bengal. That the search for 'base areas' in Bihar was on, became evident after Musheiri, a small block of 12 villages in Muzaffarpur, became one of the nerve-centres of the Naxalites in Bihar in mid-1968.

By May 1969 the movement was reported to have fanned outside the village of Musheiri. On 23 June 1969 nearly 200 armed labourers organised by Naxalites raided the house and farm of former State Cooperative Minister Mahantha Ram Kishore Das and looted about 150 maunds of oilseeds and maize at village Chapra, of the Midnapur police station near Muzaffarpur. Events were moving fast, and reports of growing

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tension trickled into the press.

That June another event happened. Jayaprakash Narayan abruptly put off his anticipated tour of Uttarakhand and with unusual haste turned up at Musheiri. The reasons were mixed, many and interwoven. While at Pauri in Uttarkhand he was informed that Badri Narayan Sinha and Gopalji Mishra, president and secretary respectively of the District Sarvodaya Mandal, had been served with death notices by the Naxalites in Muzaffarpur.

This, Jayaprakash Narayan admitted, elated him for the reasons he described; "It seemed they had decided to move from such inanimate targets as statues, pictures and books of the country's great leaders—Ramakrishna Paramahansa Deb, Swami Vivekananda, Gurudeva Rabindranath, Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose—to their living followers and admirers." In short Sarvodaya and its adherents were in danger. JP added, "I had been feeling for quite some time past that our movement was losing its fire, and we, its workers, were becoming stale and flabby of spirit," Sarvodaya needed to sharpen its edge and Musheiri seemed ideal.

"I look upon what I am doing not as a fight against anybody but as a fight for social and economic justice," wrote JP. By this strange twist of logic it appears that the Naxalites represented despotic, landed interests and thus needed confrontation. With Jayaprakash Narayan's arrival in Musheiri, a lot of excitment was anticipated.

A splurge of rhetoric and righteous oratory followed. In his reply to Ayub Khan of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, informing him about the Naxalite attack on his centre at Jamshedpur, he wrote, "If partisans of violence look upon Gandhi as an enemy, should that surprise us? We should rather feel happy that the advocates of bloody revolution should find such power in Gandhiji's ideas and fear them so much that they should want to destroy it, the brighter and purer it shines forth."

Years later, Pyare Mohan Tripathi, 44, who had worked with the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development (AVARD) for 13 years as a project officer in Musheiri, recounted with discomfiture; "By 1972 itself JP had realised that his objectives of social change and reconstruction could not be achieved through the Musheiri way." He went on to describe

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that despite the changes the AVARD brought about in the area, the minimum action that the state government should have taken — like consolidation of land — was still to get going.

When members of the AVARD, including Tripathi, met those extremists who returned to Musheiri after the amnesty in early 1978, they found that most of them still retained their beliefs in violent struggle. Even though the former leaders — Rajkishore, Tasleem, Ramdev Paswan and Ashok — were dead, their disciples pledged to carry on their unfinished task. At the meeting held at the high school in Prahladpur village in Musheiri block, Ramchandar, one of those released, said, "All the causes still remain."

Tripathi agreed that at least for some of them it was valid. Ramchandar had returned after the death of his father and mother, while in jail, to find that the *jhuggi* that once belonged to him had been demolished years ago. The more rabid, like Rampirit Paswan, even refused to meet the self-styled Gandhians. For the AVARD the 33 families that needed rehabilitation were still an intransigent, recalcitrant lot who only demanded that the AVARD try to dissuade the police from harassing them unnecessarily by attributing the most ordinary theft in the area to them.

"All that we could tell them was this. We do not agree to the whole thing, but we can be friends till a part of the journey for social justice, since both of us are concerned about the poor."

When Bhojpur began to simmer most of the attention in the ranks of the Sarvodayis was in areas other than peasant redress. The 1974 Bihar student movement had spread all over the country and after a prolonged exile from politics, Jayaprakash Narayan found himself as ideologue-messiah — restored patriarch, riding the crest of a youth wave in the state, rising to clear the Augean Stables once and for all. JP's new slogan "Total Revolution" became a magic word.

Less than a hundred kilometres away from Patna, the state capital of Bihar, a growing trickle of blood had begun to flow in the Harijan hamlets of Bhojpur. On 2 June 1975 landlords pillaged the huts of poor Chamars in Hadiabad village of Jagdishpur block. Two weeks earlier on 15 May the police had gunned down Rampravesh Kahar and Gopal Chamar at Dullam-

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chak village, Sahar.

Jayaprakash Narayan had been aware of what was happening in the area. According to Tripathi, one of JP's most trusted Sarvodaya lieutenants, Baburao Chandawar, had begun to make trips into Bhojpur as early as 1972. In October 1974, the All India Sarva Sewa Sangh decided to launch a movement under JP's guidance to check the growing Naxalite menace.

In Bhojpur itself, shortly after the Sonatola incident in March 1974 a Peace Committee had been formed to restore law and order in the disturbed blocks. Among its founding members were Beij Behari Mahto, Raghunath Rai and Ramprit Singh. This fifteen-member committee organised meetings at various 'disturbed' villages. In the eyes of the government the committee did not lack respectability. Most of the leading members were reformists and did not approve of violence. Ramprit Singh subsequently became the chairman of the Janata Party in the district.

The committee pleaded to landlords to give a better deal to the agricultural labourers; their main slogan being "Give four seers of rice not *khesari*" as daily wages: *khesari* is basically unthreshed grain and had been medically proved dangerous, causing beriberi, skin diseases and other assorted physical ailments.

But the meetings organised in Agiaon, Bansidehri, Ekwari, Gulzarpur, Khaira, Bahuara, Bargaon, Narayanpur and other villages did not prove of much consequence. At Agiaon, landlords accepted the wage reguirements but came back to the old norms as soon as the labourers dropped their agitation. At Bargaon, the landlords did not comply at all.

That extremism was appearing prominently in villages where agricultural labourers were fighting for equitable wages was noted by the organisers: Ekwari, Chauri, Berath, Bansidehri had witnessed discontent over this issue, though not solely because of it. "Ultimately, the peace programme flopped", noted Ramprit Singh. All these precedents apparently did not deter the indomitable spirit of Sarvodaya leader.

On 12 and 13 June 1975 Jayaprakash Narayan toured the extremist areas of Bhojpur asking the people to shun the path of violence and work for "Total Revolution". In a tone of promise he urged crowds at Narayanpur, "If in five years from

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now, nothing changes I will not ask you to give up Naxalism. But for the moment let us establish democracy and work for the Total Revolution." The itinerary was short, covering two days, and he took time off to visit the family members of Rampravesh Kahar and Ramabachar Ahir of Dullamchak. Rumours have it that Jayaprakash Narayan also conferred with senior Naxalite leaders in the area attempting a dialogue, which failed.

After JP's visit to the district one of the caustic remarks that ran from village to village characterised the local population's distrust of any attempt at making peace and asking them to forget the struggle in the greater interests of non-violent Total Revolution. "When the monsoons arrive the frogs begin to croak," they quipped.

But JP completed the two-day trip in his characteristic way. In the role of a righteous patriarch he refused to drink a glass of water offered by a Dullamchak landlord in Sahar, because the police were posted at his residence. On the other hand he assured them that if they would only mend their ways, they could be saved from their final nemesis. Later events were to prove that some of the landlords took this as JP's guarantee that following his trip peace would return to Bhojpur.

On the other hand there were signs that the state was beginning to view the district as a problem area and thought that some socio-economic factor lay at the root of the peasant unrest. Looking for solutions, the Bihar cabinet set up a 15-member committee to study the Naxalite "problem" and discuss solutions, under the patronage and support of the then Governor of Bihar, R.D. Bhandare. Before the report of the Social Injustice Removal Committee, headed by a scheduled caste minister, Baleshwar Ram, and an IAS officer, Madhav Singh, was complete — the time fixed for its completion was one year — the Emergency was imposed. As a result a ban on all Naxalite groups was enforced and presumably the question of looking at the insurgency as an outcome of a societal problem was given up, as showing unnecessary concern for the anti-state poor peasants of the district.

For both the Sarvodayis and the state the Bhojpur case was suspended for the time being. While the police continued to use the lathi and the bullet to stem the unrest, those under JP

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were busy organising the tide of resentment that was building up in Bihar against the Emergency. It was after the Janata victory in March 1977, following the sixth Lok Sabha elections, that once again both JP and the state could turn to happenings in Bhojpur.

It took time, however. JP was old and tired. But the Total Revolution in Bihar bore fruit. In place of the crusty, khadi-kurta, rubber-chappal clad Sarvodayis, he had earned the critical support of a new band of selfless youth, who refused to exploit the anti-Emergency struggle for political largesse and were instead interested in completing the goals of the Total Revolution. Instead of the flabby support of the old Sarvodayis, JP inherited the unflinching dedication of a few scores of such youth who were christened at the feet of JP—the Sangharsh Vahini.

Jayaprakash Narayan, two years after his first visit to the disturbed area of Bhojpur, had lamented on 17 November 1977, "I am deeply perturbed about the volatile situation that prevails in Bhojpur district. It is reported that in the last few years many landless peasants have died in clashes with rich peasants. In this situation the Sarvodaya and other non-partisan workers will have to work carefully. They have a significant role to play. They must do something to remove the unrest in the villages of Bhojpur. A prominent, senior Sarvodaya activist Baburao Chandawar has decided to invest his time and energy in Bhojpur. He has proposed that various sections try to come together and resolve social and economic problems in a peaceful manner. I desire that my Naxalite friends work together with the non-violent revolutionaries, and help in creating a people's movement and a non-violent process in bringing about social and economic change."

In accordance with JP's continuing interest in Bhojpur members of the Sangharsh Vahini began their first trip to Sahar on the evening of 11 October 1977. By 21 October the first trip was complete; another trip was made between 30 January and February 1978. A series of experiences were recorded faithfully by members of the Bhojpur wing of the Sangharsh Vahini in the Sahar Report—jottings from fields trips to the villages of Dullamchak, Bansidehri and Bargaon. They felt that at those places where the villagers often came to them and articulated their

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problems, the landlords viewed the Vahini as suspect, as pro-peasant people whose presence in the area was not exactly desirable.

That the villages of Dulamchak, Bansidehri and Bargaon were being considered for a further base for Vahini entry was also stressed in the Sahar report — as the front paw of a chastened Sarvodaya foothold in Bhojpur. An issue that a columnist in the Calcutta-based leftist weekly, *Frontier*, observed with predictable suspicion, bearing in mind the AVARD attempt in Musheiri. They even came to the conclusion that since the Naxalite movement, according to them, had in places ignored the class dimension and often stressed the caste factor, there was a place for them to work: to organise the labourers on class lines rather than caste lines.

Towards the end of the Sahar Report the Vahini considered a package of 'essential reforms' for the peasants: the distribution of *gairmazarua* land among landless labourers, the distribution of surplus land in accordance with the Ceilings Act, the amicable resolution of wage disputes, the setting up of cloth, soap and oil village industries to provide labourers with extra incomes, the removal of iniquitous temple-entry prohibitions for Harijans, the removal of thanas, law courts and police camps from the village — because they only increased the exploitation, the organisation of poor peasants to end the exploitation of the village by the city. Shades of JP and Sarvodaya, elements of the socialist ideology of Ram Manohar Lohia and an idealised zeal that the neglected agrarian promises by the State government be implemented immediately, characterised the wishful, idealist tenor of the Sangharsh Vahini. A panacea that sought a non-violent solution to the deep unrest in the district, remained the essence of the Sahar Report.

By the middle of 1978 the state government once again became interested in the movement and its causes. A committee on Naxalites was constituted by the Chief Minister, Karpoori Thakur, who in May 1973 had violently protested against the police mayhem in Chauri, to look into the affairs of the disturbed Sahar block of Bhojpur. Four hand-picked men were chosen to guide the investigations: Kuar Bahadur Saxena, IAS, Badri Narayan Sinha, DIG (Naxalite), Dr Sacchidanand, the director of the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, and

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Partha Mukherjee, an Associate Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

The casting was clever: one diligent, selfless IAS man, one policeman-journalist, and two academics of social standing — a cast that was viewed by some as an unnecessary intervention of academia in affairs of the police state.

When Bajrang Singh, a socialist youth of Patna, and Kamlesh Kumar Sinha, a research hand at the A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, were requested to go to Sahar for an inquiry they were slightly taken aback. Kamlesh Kumar Sinha was further surprised when on his return from the area, he found that along with his Director there was another man who asked him about his findings. His name was Badri Narayan Sinha. Bajrang Singh, who is known for his Socialist beliefs, dropped out, diffident that such a task might cast a permanent blemish on his integrity.

A tone of concern and accurate observation emerged in Kamlesh Sinha's report, "A Field Trip to Sahar Block in Bhojpur District," which he completed in August 1978. He observed a strange sort of recalcitrance in the villages of Karbasin and Korandehri in Sahar block. Sifting and weighing the events and clashes in the two villages, he concluded, "This movement is a movement against the forward castes by the poor backward castes and Harijans. The assumption behind it may be that poor backward castes and Harijans have been exploited for a long time by the forward castes and this movement is a revenge against the atrocities done in the past." Dr Sacchidanand, on the other hand, is believed to have accompanied B.N. Sinha to the jails to interview Naxalite leaders.

In February 1979 there was an interesting conclave in the village of Bihta English, in the Tarari block of Bhojpur. Under the leadership of the old Socialist Ram Ekbal a five-day Sammelan ambitiously named, "*Bharat ke Gaon mein Gaon ka pratham Sammelan*" was convened. Apart from a few youths, some from the Socialist ranks and others from the Sangharsh Vahini, the rest who attended were old and infirm villagers. For five days, from 23 to 27 February, the old Socialist gospel of Lohia —the village as being exploited by the town—was tediously spelt out. For all practical purposes, however, the Socialists who had once paved the way for social awakening in Tarari had

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been displaced by their latter-day successors. And the message of Ram Ekbal and Kishan Patnaik fell on old and deaf ears. Their fervour no longer communicated itself to the people.

A month earlier in Patna, on 4-5 January 1979, a group of landlords had carried the dead bodies of Ramdev Singh, his mother and father, from the village of Narahi-Chandi, Ara Mofussil, to JP's residence at Kadamkuan, Patna. Enraged at the death of their kin at the hands of peasant guerillas on 3 January, they demanded that justice be done. They blamed the old, tired man on dialysis, Jayaprakash Narayan, for falsely assuring them that peace would return to the district. Then they moved to the Bihar Assembly, the corpses on the roof of a truck, to seek hearing from its members.

JP and Badri Narayan Sinha, DIG (Naxalite), were dead by the close of 1979. The two symbols of authority—the Sarvodaya leader and the chief exponent of counter-insurgency warfare in Bihar—were no more. It was time to comment on the bitter Harijan harvest in the rice-fields on the banks of the Sone. A time to reflect. On 22 October 1979 the editorial in *The Searchlight*, Patna, spoke about the findings, incomplete at the time, of the Committee set up by Karpoori Thakur. It recorded a belated truth, a truth that all the dailies in Bihar had denied for the last decade, ever since the emergence of a peasant movement in Bhojpur.

The Committee's partially complete report commented, "The Naxalite menace is not a problem of law and order at all and it is linked with socio-economic injustice. That apart, it has also found that 50 per cent of cases against Naxalites are false and are the result of personal enmity."

In the plains of Bhojpur the war that had been launched more than a decade ago is still on, despite the belated admissions and heartwringings of the state. In November 1979, *The Hindustan Times* reported, that the Bihar government's writ has virtually ceased to run in at least half a dozen 'Naxal-liberated anchals' of Bhojpur.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Voices

On the awakening in the plains of Bhojpur, there are voices of sympathy, voices of hate. In dusty little marketplaces by the light of kerosene lamps, people gather. In this small district—1551 square miles—with a population of 2,007,669 people, something is happening. And the people, the police, the poor peasants and the landlords speak. In their own way. Often with bated breath. Even the mute speak volumes.

☐ *Jagannath Pathak, an employee in the Accountant-General's Office, Bihar, who belongs to the village of Neemaj in Brahmpur block*:

"The Naxalites are looters. They have taught the illiterate that by killing the landlord they will inherit the land. But the logic is wrong. If a landless labourer kills a landlord, the problem is not solved."

☐ *Biswanath Jadhav, the CPI Sarpanch of Raghunathpur in Brahmpur block:*

"Men can tolerate all. But when women and daughters are assaulted it becomes unbearable. Anyone who revolts is called a Naxalite. Like in Bhadwar, a village in Brahmpur, the labourers demanded more wages so the landlords harassed them. The police are the same caste-types. Harijans have been raped, looted and arrested—all in the name of Naxalites."

☐ *Balram Pande, an executive sadasya of Neemaj, Brahmyur*:

"Naxalism is just backward-forward tension."

☐ *Ahir landlords of Icchri, Jagdishpur:*

"The Naxalites do not steal money or valuables. They are

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educated and well trained. They do not fight for higher wages. They want political power—rajsatta."

☐ *Song composed by Musahar Bihari Ram, who belongs to Ekwari, Sahar:*

Kaise sudhri, kaise sudhri
Jinkar bigarawa chalania
Kaise sudhri, kaise sudhri
Raat din begar karawe, mare pite aur darawe
Hamni ke izzat pur hardam or akhe khayal
Dekhli dhanikan shaitaniya
Kaise sudhri, kaise sudhri

How will they change
Those who have fallenways
How will they change
Begaar night and day, beat and terrorise us
Eye our women.
Those cursed rich
How will they change

☐ *Ram Ekbal, prominent Socialist leader of Orsi, Tarvari:*
"Naxalism is neither class struggle nor caste conflict, it is just an idea put into the poor that by killing the upper rich they will get the *gaddi*. Nothing will succeed with individual terror: Jagdish Mahto and Dr Nirmal acted out of anger."

Interview: 7 March 1978 at Orsi

☐ *Banarsi Devi Gupta, woman organiser of the Khetihar Kisan Mazdoor Sangh:*
"A lot of innocent people have been victims of litigation. Naxalites do not believe in surrender. Their way will not work until it succeeds in changing the attitudes of the poor."

Interview: 7 March 1978 at Saraiya, Barhara

☐ *Ram Gopal Tewari, the mukhiya of village Bagangawa, Barhara:*
"Naxalism in Bhojpur has been born out of personal con-

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tradictions. Someone gets raped, the struggle begins and moves on."

Interview: 8 March 1978

☐ *A Dusadh of Bagangawa, Barhara*:
"The Naxalites taught us some things. We have a right to this land. We must get better wages. We must have dignity."

☐ *Rameshwar Prasad, headmaster of Baligaon High School, Semraon:*

"There is oppression. I have been abused for sitting in the presence of landlords. The Naxalite movement is mainly a struggle for *izzat*."

Interview: 12 March 1978

☐ *Rameswar Prasad Singh, B.A.L.L.B., a landlord of Hadiabad, Jagdishpur*:

"We want to give good wages. But fertiliser is costly, thus we cannot give the labourers what they want."

Interview: 12 March 1978

☐ *Mother of Sakldev Mahta interned as a suspect after the police raid at Barnau, Jagdishpur:*

"Can you tell me, whcre is my son?"

☐ *Landless women of Icchri, Jagdishpur:*

"The landlords oppress us. They make us work on their fields and do not even give us our share of crops. What is wrong about the Naxalites?"

☐ *Rampirit Singh, a 1974 Peace Committee member:*

"The whole struggle is about three seers of *khesari*. In Ekwari, it began with the assault of Jagdish Mahto. The killings of landlords followed. They were not big landlords, only *latheiths*. The type who unlike the landlord does not sit at home, content with wealth and power. He goes out to the fields and shouts, 'Where are the Naxalites. Let me see them.' And is killed. In most places—Chauri, Ekwari, Berath, Bansidehri—trouble began with wages. Another cause has been the molestation of women. Most Naxalite

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victims have been debauchees and profligates, At present in Bhojpur, there are less actions. But the struggle is on. People will not accept coercion. Then there is the police. The more they kill Harijans, the more the Harijans will fight. Did not Lenin say, that the more the Tsar persecuted us, the more strong our party will be."

Interview: 16 March 1978

☐ *Kamlesh Kumar Sinha, employee of A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna*:

"While talking to some members of Harijans in Sahar market they said, 'This is an international problem. This problem can never be solved by the government through its varions agencies. The Naxalites would themselves solve their problems." Talking about the movement they said, 'This is not a movement, this is a class struggle as was said by Marx.' When we tried to know some facts about the movement they said, 'It will be better if you go to the landowners and talk to them. You think just the opposite of what they say. You will get a clear picture about the movement.' All Harijans were tight-lipped about the movement."

(Excerpts from '*A Field Trip to Sahar Block in Bhojpur District*, August 1978).

☐ *Girija Nandan Prasad, Sole Member, Chauri Firing Inquiry Commission*, 31 December 1975, concluding the 189-page report:

"The local police officers were not well equipped to deal with the growing menace of Naxalite violence and were treating Naxalite criminals and Naxalite crimes in a conventional fashion as an ordinary law-and-order problem. They were further handicapped by the fact that the Naxalite party was a political party which had not been banned by the government. In fact, the realisation of Naxalite activities in village Chauri requiring a firm line of approach to the problem had come rather too late. Suitable directions and equipments to deal with the situation should have come to the local police from higher authorities on the lines which were given, about a year later, on the occasion of the raid made by the police In Sonatola."

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☐ *B.N. Sinha, DIG (Naxalite)*

"The composition of the victims either killed or injured in this violence and also the extremists either killed or arrested makes interesting revelation and clears away the smokescreen of a mere fight between the Harijans and upper castes. The ideology being propagated in this belt becomes crystal clear."

Excerpt: "From Naxalbari to Ekwari,"
The Searchlight. 11 June, 1975

☐ *Umesh Chand, Sushil Kumar and Arun Kumar, members of the Sangharsh Vahini, who toured villages in Bhojpur in early 1978:*

"Whatever be the attitudes towards the strength and weaknesses of the Naxalite movement, one thing is clear—we do not want to suppress it. Evaluating and learning from its experiences we wish that incidents of killings come to an end. The awakening that has come to the villages of Sahar should not be snuffed out, rather the spark should burn brighter in the right way. . .and that the villagers achieve their rights."

Excerpts from "The Sahar Report"

☐ *The Searchlight*, 22 October 1979:

"The term Naxalite has its origin in Naxalbari. . .The movement was infectious and it travelled to Bihar. There was a flare-up in 1968 in an area called Musheiri, a small block of 12 villages in Muzaffarpur district. Soon after it spread to other places and Shahabad and Patna districts were affected in 1975. Since then hundreds of Naxalites, peasants and policemen have been killed in encounters. The government has not so far taken any concrete step to solve the problem."

☐ *The Hindustan Times, Evening News*, November 7, 1979:

"The Bihar government's writ has virtually ceased to run in at least half a dozen 'Naxal-liberated' anchals of Bhojpur district in South Bihar."

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Glossary

Ahar Canal
Ahir A backward caste, traditionally milkmen
Arahar Pulse
Baksheeshnama A deed of gift or donation
Busti Dwelling place
Barhayeil Carpenter
Bara Jati Upper castes
Batai Share cropping
Banihar Semi-bonded labourer
Bhumihars Upper caste community, traditionally cultivators
Bhabi/Bhaoji Sister-in-law
Bakasht Land which passed from the teneant to the landlord due to inability to pay rent
Chaukidari Tax Cess paid by the village to the watchman
Charagah Grazing ground
Chaprasi Peon
Dasta Squad
Diara An island which is formed in the bed of a river after the tide
Dusadh A backward caste
Faraar To abscond or go underground
Fakir A recluse
Fauzdari Criminal court case
Goala See Ahir
Garib Poor
Zamindar Proprietor of landed estate, landlord
Hulla Commotion
Halwaha Ploughhand
Izzat Dignity
Kaand Outrage or violent incident
Khalihan Granary
Kavi Poet

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Kisan Sabha Peasants' organisation
Koeris Backward caste community
Kisan Cultivator
Kurmis Backward caste community
Kayastha Upper caste
Katha Measure of land
Kacchi Unthreshed cereals and pulses
Larai Struggle
Lagaan Rent
Latheith Muscleman
Mukhiya Village headman, normally a member of the panchayat
Musahars Scheduled caste
Nagara Drum
Pehelwan Muscleman
Piada Odd job man of the zamindar
Rajput Upper caste, traditionally warriors
Rakhel Concubine or keep
Sarkar Government
Salaami Illegal cess

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