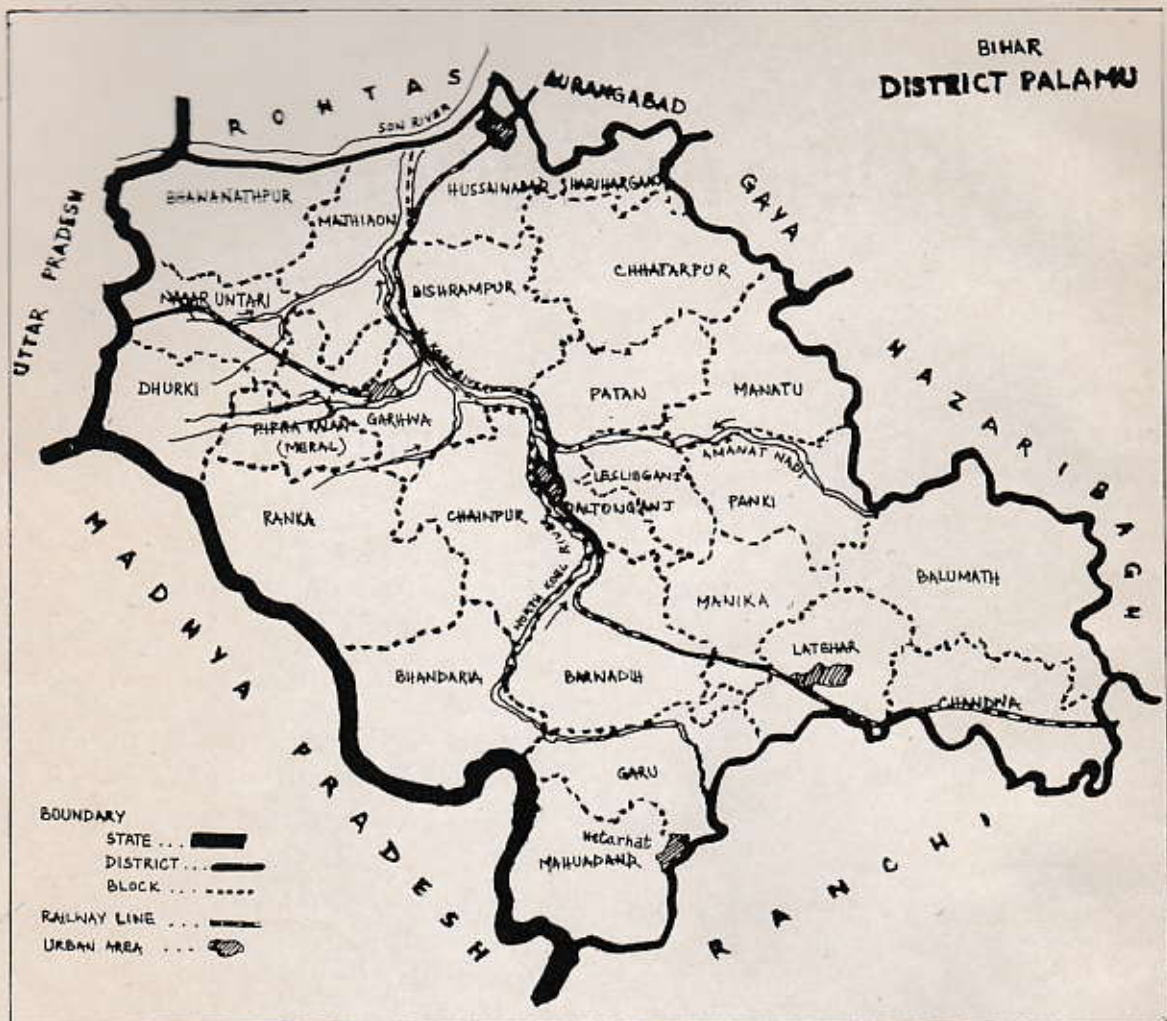


# *KOEL KE KINARE*

Agrarian Conflict in Palamu Plains

**People's Union for Democratic Rights  
Delhi  
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*Palamu, part of south Bihar plateau, falls in the trijunction of India's three largest states, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. With the lowest density in Bihar, its 2 million population is spread in over 3500 villages spread over 25 development blocks and 30 police station areas. The current social tensions are concentrated in the north and east on both sides of the river Koel, in Majhiaon, Garhwa, Bishrampur, Hariharganj, Chhatarpur, Patan and Panki.*

## **KOEL KE KINARE**

The people of Palamu live on the margins of Bihar's agrarian economy. They have been at the receiving end of its violent polity. In recent years, Naxalites, among others, have been actively involved in organising the rural poor in the North Koel valley of the district. In response to this, a new landlord army, which calls itself "Sunlight Sena" and works in collusion with the local administration, has unleashed a reign of terror in the area. A team of People's Union for Democratic Rights, Delhi, visited the area in the last week of March and investigated the conflict. The struggles of the poor and the oppressed, like their economic and social lives, are as a rule marginalised and pushed into obscurity. They do not make the headlines. This report is an attempt to bring to light the lives and struggles of the people of Palamu plains and the repression that they are facing.

# Introduction

People of Palamu recount their births and lives, compute their loans and interests, recall their marriages and deaths with famines and droughts as the reference point. The course of social history of Palamu is deeply influenced by the flow of water. Or, rather, the absence of it. The river Son flows on the northern frontier of the district. But it hardly benefits the area. So is the case with the river Kanhar on the western frontier. The Koel, flowing from south, traverses the entire length of the district to join the Son. Its tributaries Auranga and Amanat flow through the district. But then the Koel and its tributaries practically dry up in the summer. There are also 25 notable streams and rivulets, fed by rains and springs in the hills. All these non-perennial sources are dependent on forests and fluctuating seasonal rains.

But the area of forests both in the district and more so in the southern uplands is on the decline. The total official forest area was 3,200 square miles in 1921. In 1981 it was reduced to less than 2,000 sq miles. These official estimates, it should be noted, are usually inflated figures. Presently 48 percent of the total area of the district is supposed to be under forest cover (16 percent in Bihar and 23 percent in the country). About 16 percent of the forests are reserved forests, mostly under the Betla National Park, a Project Tiger area. The rest is spread more in the south and less in north Palamu. Whether or not they exist in reality, the large notified areas do reduce the area available for cultivation. Much of the rest of the district is hilly region with long stretches of undulating rocky plains. A distinctive feature of the Palamu landscape is the preponderance of drought prone uplands over low-lying lands. All these factors determine the availability of land for cultivation and its fertility. Presently not more than 23 percent of the land is under cultivation. Most of the cultivation takes place in the monsoon and post-monsoon season (bhadaï and kharif crops). Quick maturing crops like maize, khesari and linseed or less water consuming crops like jowar and grams are popular among most of the small cultivators. Paddy cultivation is confined to not more than a third of the total cultivating area. The district as a whole is a chronic food shortage region. This inhospitability of the terrain makes Palamu the lowest density district in the state.

The situation is somewhat better in the north Koel valley. The zone is an extension of the rich alluvial tract of south Bihar plains. The area under cultivation is more than 40 percent of the area. In some parts a second crop is also cultivated. The density of human population is almost double the district average. But here too the land is not flat and is interspersed with hills and low ranges. Nor are there any perennial sources of water.

Presently, altogether not more than 25 per cent of the cultivated area is irrigated. Most of it is through indigenous irrigation systems more suited to the terrain. They help reduce the intensity of the scarcity. But the irrigation policy pursued by the government consistently neglected these 'other sources' of irrigation, with no dependable perennial rivers or very little ground water, Palamu is dependent on

rains. But it is located in the rain shadow zone of south Bihar plains. The fall or failure of the monsoon or the critical hathia rains spells disaster for Palamu. The district faced scarcity or famine in 65 out of the last hundred years. For the present generation the great famine of 1967 is a living memory that still haunts their material and cultural existence. As a result of large scale deforestation the average annual rainfall declined over time. It was, for instance, 1335 mm in the seventies but became 1142 mm by the eighties. The

## Palamu District

Population	20 lakhs	
Scheduled Caste (%)	25	(15)
Scheduled Tribe (%)	18	(8)
Urban population (%)	6	(12)
Density (persons/sq.km)	150	(402)
Literacy (%)	20	(26)

All figures in brackets refer to Bihar State ; 1981.

forest policy and the irrigation policy thus made Palamu into a perpetually drought prone area. It was declared so in 1975.

Yet agriculture continues to be the major source of employment, for more than 85 percent of the working population. Many of the 65 percent non-working population are dependent on them. Forests offer the people limited alternatives. Bamboo, timber and other major forest works now leased out direct to the companies employ very few. Lac, in whose production the district is second highest after the neighbouring Ranchi, offers more opportunities. Tendu leaves, with an average of 2.5 lakh bags a year, offer some work during the summer months. Altogether not more than 2 lakh people are employed, for brief periods, in forest work and forest based industries. Even as alternate sources of food and fuel the importance of forests declined over time with the progressive decline of forests and even more progressive restrictions on their accessibility. Mining, unlike in the Chhota Nagpur, is not very significant here. Coal, limestone and graphite mines, some of which are captive, offer very little employment. The cement factory at Japla owned by the Sahu Jains, for a very long time the only symbol of modernization in Palamu, is now closed down. A caustic soda plant owned by the Birlas at Rehla has come up recently. However it is not modern but household industry that offers more employment. And even that employs not more than two percent of the working population. Another 13 percent is engaged in trade and services.

Socially and ecologically Palamu, falling between south Bihar plains and Chhota Nagpur plateaus, combines the worst features of both. Neglect of indigenous irrigated systems, absence of any worthwhile industry, declining forests, limited cultivable land, fall in rainfall and perpetual drought -- are all part of the ecological condition of Palamu that forms the backdrop of current social tensions. Shaped by each other, the social and ecological conditions took their present form during colonial rule.

The British came to Palamu initially to establish strategic control. Recurrent tensions with Cheros chiefs eventually led to a major revolt in 1857. Jagirdars, Chero chieftains, and estate owners and common people fought bitter battles against the British. Leaders of the revolt, Nilambar Pandey and Pitamber Pandey, are revered as heroes in the folk history of Palamu. Eventually the revolt was suppressed when Palamu fort, now located inside the Betla National Park, was captured by the Commissioner of Ranchi, Dalton, after whom the present district headquarters, Daltonganj, is named. Indigo and cotton cultivation were the main attractions in the initial years. The Neel Kothi now houses the district school. The road to Aurangabad is still referred to as cotton road, although cotton cultivation practically disappeared. It was replaced by forest trade. Forests in Koel valley are rich in sal, teak and bamboo. Commercial forestry, pursued for a hundred unrestricted years was the focal point of colonial trade and rule. The migrant business communities, like Marwaris later joined by Sikhs, came during the course of forest trade. Even today they dominate trade, education, culture, religion and politics of urban Palamu. Land revenue was the other major consideration of the colonial rulers. The villages were farmed out to traditional estate owners. Altogether by the 1920s there were 1320 estates, big or small. In southern parts, which were part of Chhota Nagpur Paraganas, the estate owners included Kharwar tribal chiefs and money lenders and traders who had acquired land. In the central parts, that were part of Japla Paraganas, they included Chero chiefs. In the northern parts, that were part of Gaya Paraganas, the estate owners were Rajputs, Brahmins and some Bhumihars. There were also Muslim zamindars mostly in the north.

Indebtedness that continues to haunt Palamu became endemic during colonial rule. Famine prone terrain and oppressive tenurial arrangements led the peasantry into a vicious circle of debt that was sustained by usurious interest rates. Land changed hands from people to money lenders or zamindars in some cases. It was in this process that the Saus emerged as landowners and people became bonded labourers in their own lands. The worst affected were the adivasis in the south Palamu, especially bhuinyas and parahiyas. Neither the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act (1906) nor the Money Lenders Act (1938) arrested this process. In fact it continued in the post colonial period. Political and economic life at the village level is still dominated by money lenders cum landlords, in many parts of Palamu.

## IRRIGATION the "other sources"

Till the late fifties there were no canals, government or private, in Palamu. There were tanks and wells, but very few, providing water to not more than 10 percent of the total irrigated area. All the rest was irrigated by what the government lists as "other sources". The irrigation policy of successive governments is geared to every source other than the "other sources". Major irrigation projects are found to be either unsuitable or unviable in the undulating hilly tracts of Palamu. Some canals were dug in the last three decades. One of them was through the Kuku dam that submerged 13 villages and badly affected 17 more villages. Subsequently people opposed the Auranga dam (Manika) that was to have submerged about 125 villages. Presently the project is at a standstill. Altogether canals irrigate about 9,000 hectares, comprising 13 percent of the total irrigated area. An equal amount is served by modern tanks. There are not many private tube wells since in Palamu even landlords owning 50 acres (above the ceiling level) cannot afford them. Other wells came up that irrigate 17,000 hectares, about 24 percent of the irrigated land. The medium and minor irrigation schemes launched under the Drought Prone Areas Programme (DPAP), Bihar Hill Area Water Development Programme and under Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) are all tuned towards forms of irrigation that are essentially unsuitable to Palamu. In any case here they are a cruel joke. A study done for the Bihar government by the A.N. Sinha Institute, Patna revealed that "23 medium and minor irrigation schemes and construction of 2275 big diameter wells" launched with fanfare, essentially remained on paper. In a major scandal in 1985 when people agitated against the sudden and baseless levy of water cess, the inquiring officials discovered that one of the irrigation projects for which funds were allocated and which was supposed to have been completed, never really was set up. So is the case with the dysfunctional river lift pumps set up on Amanat and Koel. Yet funds keep flowing, unlike water, in Palamu. In the last financial year, 1989-90, a total of Rs 4,36,50,000 was allocated under DPAP and TSP. And so the "other sources" continue to supply water to the dry fields of Palamu. What are these mysterious "other sources"? They include *pynes* and *karhas*, the diversion channels that bring water from springs and rain-fed rivers, rivulets, streams and surface drainage tanks (*ahars*). More common here are *bandhs* and *hirs*, embankments which are more suited to the hilly undulating tracts of Palamu. From *hirs* and *bandhs* connections to the fields are sometimes laid with *chahaks* and *bhaos*. It is these indigenous systems that are referred to as "other sources". The irrigation policy that neglected them for forty years, fifteen of which came under the special drought areas programmes, could not provide irrigation to more than 25 percent of the cultivated area, one half of which continues to be irrigated by these other sources. The decline in proportion is not that real. In the mid fifties these sources irrigated 40,000 hectares and in the mid eighties they irrigate 35,000 hectares. They survived the willful neglect obviously because they are more suited ecologically and socially.

The British land revenue settlements granted juridical sanction to the unbridled traditional social power of some these estate owners. In many of these estates in the north the owners leased out land to

immigrant peasants from south Bihar plains. Thus tenancy came to prevail in parts of Palamu. Ordinary peasants in most of the large estates lived and died like serfs for generations. Levies, cesses, taxes and a variety of customary extractions that are today generating tensions were part of this system. In about 25 large estates the police and magisterial powers were left with the owners. It is the descendants of these large estate owners that now lead landlord armies in the north Koel valley.

After independence all these intermediaries were abolished. But this formal legal abolition had little meaning for the tenants and other peasants of Palamu. Even where the control of land did actually change hands, most of the small holders could not retain its possession. Given the terrain, the increasing frequency of droughts and the cycle of indebtedness they are bound to, the land usually gravitated back to the landlords. Most land transfers under land reform remained on paper only. Two lakh acres during the Bhoodan movement, 40,000 acres after ceiling laws were promulgated in the early seventies, 20,000 acres during the heyday of the twenty-point programme, and, most recently, 24,000 during the Chief Ministership of Bhagwat Jha Azad -- these are some of the figures given to us by the local administration and other informants. And yet the district remains highest concentration in land in the state. According to a survey conducted in the notified drought prone areas, about 9 per cent household owning more than 50 acres control 62 per cent of the land in Palamu. The peasant activists list about 16 landlords who own more than 500 acres of land in the north Koel valley. Some of them own 3000-4000 acres. Almost all of them are owners of estates that were abolished. Tales about their power are recounted with awe, fear and now perhaps with a sense of revenge. The most in-famous of them all is Jagdishwar Jeetsingh Mauwar of Manatu, better known as the "Man-eater of Manatu". He owns more than 6000 acres of land and control more than half of Manatu's 165 villages. In his area, begar (forced labour) is common not only in agricultural work but also in wood and firewood collection, bamboo and basket making, mahua and tendu collection. He maintains pet tigers in his palace to which people from all villages are obliged to supply their cattle and goats. Accounts of his legendary cruelty have it that he used to feed rebellious labourers to his tigers. This is how he came to be called the "Maneater of Manatu".

Tigers apart, the conditions are similar in many of the other large estates. Customary extractions, compulsory labour by all classes of peasantry during peak season, and violent subjugation are common in these areas. Notable among others are former cabinet minister, Manik Baccha (Shankar Pratap Deo Singh) of Nagar estate, whose son Dharmendra Baccha (Dharmendra Pratap Deo Singh) is the leader of the Sunlight Sena; former minister and present BJP MLA Gopinath Singh of Ranka whose son Arun Singh is also a leader of the Sunlight Sena; Congress-I leader Vijay Kumar Singh of Ladigarh estate; Congress-I MLA Rajendra Pratap from Nagar Untari; former union minister and governor, Bhishm Narain Singh of Chhatarpur; Janata Dal leader Avadesh Kumar Singh of Barwadih; and former Congress-I MLA Jagat Narain Pathak of Ranka.

The second rung of landlords, unlike the zamindars and rajas, are not absentee landlords but are village based. The acreage they hold is not very high and is on the average around 30-50 acres. But some of them, especially those from smaller estates, hold vast social power. Other village-based landlords include those farmers who came in as tenants during the colonial period and the money lenders who became landowners. Practices like begar and bonded labour is common among them also. The landlords include Brahmins, Rajputs, Saus and a few Bhumihars. These upper castes together dominate the politics of the district. Backward castes are not dominant here. At the village level, about 200 of 360 panchayats are dominated by Brahmins and Rajputs. The rest include backward castes, muslims and scheduled castes and tribes in reserved constituencies. In the assembly and parliament, the Rajputs and Brahmins are joined by Marwaris and other trading groups from urban areas. On the whole, in large estate ownership and in social and political fields, Palamu is dominated by leading sections of the Rajput community. Aurangabad on the northern border, it should be noted, is referred to by them as "Chittorgarh", the uncompromising fort of the Bihari Rajputs. Their macho images and military accounts, carefully cultivated over years through myths, are part of the folk history of Palamu. Ironically, Cheroes, the Palamu

chieftains, who fought ferocious battles against the British are obscured in the revivalist history and cultural images of the region. The Sunlight Sena is a product of this mythological cultural history and material control over land.

Land and the surplus it can generate was, however, severely restricted by the changing ecological conditions. The decline in rainfall and perpetual drought led to stagnation and decline in agriculture. Palamu is one of the few districts in the country that holds a record for consistently negative growth rates in agricultural production and productivity, from the early sixties to the present. In such a situation the landlords, unlike the peasants and labourers, have options. The former estate owners turned to the state as enormous funds began to flow into the so called backward regions from about the early seventies. The irrigation schemes that could not improve irrigation facilities, special development and welfare programmes, construction works -- have all generated lucrative contracts. Schemes under minor irrigation and road development alone were allocated Rs. 10 crores per annum in the last ten years. In a befitting irony, some of the contracts are generated by the Public Works Department (PWD) which has a special wing for 'Road Construction Programme in Naxalite Affected Blocks'. Thus the more the Naxalites against the landlords, the more contracts it generates for the latter. These contracts are mostly captured by the new generation of the estate owners. Among the big contractors of the district are former owners of the estates of Ranka, Ladigarh, Nagar, and Chhatarpur. That their fathers were already involved in politics certainly helped them to bag the contracts. At the lower level, drought brought more funds into the hands of the mukhiyas and the sarpanches. In the changing situation, the village-based, lower-rung landlords resorted to more intense exploitation as droughts became more frequent. Further depression of real wages, further control over common property resources like wasteland, fallow, grazing and pasture land, tank-bed land, and other assorted government lands, that are commonly referred to as *gair mazurua* land, intensification of competition for other products like mahua -- have all become common features in the last decade at the village level.

For the people this intensified social oppression aggravates the effects of perpetual drought. Even in normal conditions their lands and wages cannot sustain them, at best, for more than four to five months in a year. In the case of the small cultivators, their raiyati land, the land they brought under cultivation with years of hard labour, was usurped by the landlords. The consumption of the khesari, that is known to cause body deformities, increased. In the long lean season they turned to forest produce like roots and leaves (chakwad, ghenta, kanda, sarai, kanwad, etc.). More important is mahua. Mahua trees are found widely in all parts of Palamu. Official enumeration alone suggests that there are over seven lakh mahua trees. The average production for the market is in the range of over 1000 metric tons per annum. But most of the mahua never reaches the market. For, it is an important source of both food and liquor for the people. Although the flowering season is confined to only a few weeks in March-April (during which we visited the area), dried mahua can be stored and is used in making rotis. Mahua fruits are also a source of cooking oil. And, of course, it is used to make liquor. As the excise policy of the Bihar government made the ordinary liquor prohibitively expensive, illicit brewing of liquor through mahua increased. Mahua trade became an attractive source of money for the landlords. Whereas previously one kilo of mahua used to be exchanged for one kilo of wheat, in the current season it is fetching 2.5 kilos of wheat. Thus mahua grown on private lands as well as on government lands is sought to be controlled by the landlords. The control of mahua is part of the landlords' increasing control over *gair mazurua* land. This kind of control is also facilitated by the structure of the villages where they are divided neatly and tightly into caste-based tolas (hamlets). All property and resources outside the tolas effectively passed into the hands of the landlords. The casual and informal but traditional access to the resources is denied to the people.

Wages in the agricultural season have declined or remained stagnant. In some of the pockets in the north where peasant organisations are active, the wage rate increased to a considerable extent. Thus it is now Rs. 5-7 in some of the areas, which is much less than the statutory minimum wage of Rs.20.50.



In most parts of Palamu, the wages are paid in kind. In 1984, a Bihar PUCL (*People's Union for Civil Liberties*) team found the wage in Hussainabad to be one kilo of wheat or two kilos of paddy. More than five years later, in the neighbouring Bishrampur, we found the wage level to be similar. The food grain prices in the open market of Palamu, on the other hand, have higher growth rates than the country or the state. This is because these grains are all imported. For example, for many years now, rice has occupied a prime position (sometimes upto 70%) among the commodities imported into the district. Thus *gair mazurua* land, wages and mahua have come to be the focal points of conflict in the current social tensions. The landlords suppress the people and subjugate them with traditional social power that has been strengthened by their connections with the modern democratic state. The people's movement led mainly by the Naxalites, has seriously challenged this situation.

## OF HUMAN BONDAGE

Indentured labour to the tea estates of Assam was endemic in colonial Palamu till the 1930s when the recruiting offices were formally closed at Daltonganj. Half a century later indentured Palamu labour can be found in Aurangabad canal works. The infamous *kamianti* system where the borrower undertakes to labour for the lender as he may require until the original loan is repaid in cash was prevalent in almost all the major estates. It was further strengthened when immigrant tenants from South Bihar plains employed on the *kamianti* local people to break the soil and extend cultivation in the northern tracts. In 1920 the *kamias* were officially estimated to be 60,000. The system was sought to be centralised within Bihar and Orissa *Kamianti* Agreement Act (1920). But it reappeared in another form. In the *halwaha* (or *palhat*), similar contracts are entered with the labourers. In Kuari village (Majhiaon), we found the entire dalit tola serving the Brahmin land owners on this system. During the Emergency (1975-77), the government launched a scheme to liberate the bonded labour. Most of them were found in former large estates like Ranka, Chainpur, Manatu, Chhatarpur in the north, Panki and Balumath in the east, Bhandaria in the west and Mahuadand in the southern forest tracts. At that time the officially identified bonded labour, by official definitions, was put at 16,400 in the district. Later, after their liberation, a nationwide survey conducted jointly by the Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF) and the National Labour Institute (NLI) estimated that Palamu has more than 20,000 bonded labour, highest in the state and among the top 27 in the country. In the early eighties when social activists of Bandhua Mukti Morcha took up the issue, they estimated that the district has about 100,000 labour bonded in various forms, including 15,000 child labour. Meanwhile, one of the investigators of the GPF-NLI survey traced some of the labour liberated in 1976. The land distributed to them was rocky and uncultivable. So they could not become cultivators. The landlords imposed a complete social and economic boycott on the liberated labour whom they contemptuously referred to as "sarkari jamai". And so they could not become labourers either. They were forced to leave their villages. In one case an adivasi migrated to Aurangabad where he became bonded again to a canal contractor. In another case the labourer and his wife shifted from one contractor to another, from one zamindar to the next more than eight times. Eventually, a decade after their benign state liberated them from bondage, they returned to their villages to become bonded again to their old masters.

# People's Movements

The periodic tribal revolts that challenged colonial rule in Chhota Nagpur found echoes in Palamu also. In the present century, the Oraons participated in the Tanabhat movement (1916). In 1920-21, Nagesias revolted against the moneylenders and landlords. In the northern tracts, the Kisan Sabha movement which rocked south Bihar was one of the earliest to take up the issues of peasants. It should be recalled that a number of tenants to whom land was leased out were migrant farmers from the south Bihar plains. In Palamu, the Sabha led tenant agitations in Ranka and Japla estates. Significantly, even at that time, the control of *gair mazurua* lands was one of the contentious issues between the farmers and the zamindars. There were similar agrarian and political movements in 1939-40 and 1942-43. The socialists, who originated from this movement, survived long after it had subsided. A section of them, who joined Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan, were involved in the Bhoodan movement in the early fifties. The Sarvodaya work continued upto the sixties. Meanwhile, in the fifties the socialists led tenant struggles in Nagar estate. They were also involved in the fight against bonded labour in some of the southern forest tracts among the adivasis in 1955-56. They also supported the movement led by Faisal Singh in adivasi areas. Influenced by Ram Manohar Lohia, socialists kept up the tradition of people's struggles in Palamu. They led struggle in Garhwa in the early sixties and once again in Ranka in 1965-66. Most of the landlords at that time were supported by the Congress or the Swatantra Party. The Swatantra Party, which had a stronghold in Palamu, won seven out of eight Assembly seats in 1962. The socialists were actively involved in relief work in the 1967 famine. The Samyukta Socialist Party won one Assembly seat in 1962 and two in 1969. The Sampurna Kranti movement led by Jaya Prakash Narayan gave an impetus to the socialist tradition in mid-seventies. Urban areas in Palamu were strongly influenced by the JP movement. From the late seventies to now, Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini is involved in movement against bonded labour and for the control of *gair mazurua* land. Significant struggles took place in Patan, Chainpur, Ranka, and Bhandaria. They coordinate with some of the mass organisations of Naxalites.

Communists emerged in Palamu only in the early seventies. The CPI was involved in trade union organisation in coal, graphite, and limestone mines. In recent years it also began working among agricultural labour in Garhwa and other blocks. The CPI(M) started some work in the rural areas in Manatu, Panki, and Leslieganj in 1982 which has since then spread to other areas. In addition, spontaneous and voluntary organisations like Bandhua Mukti Morcha and anti-dam agitations were also prominent for brief periods of time. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha is active in southern borders of the district.

Naxalites, or the CPI(ML) groups, emerged in the late seventies. These groups and their mass organisations were already active in Rohtas, Aurangabad, and Gaya on the northern border and in Hazaribagh on the east. From here they gradually moved into Palamu. The CPI(ML) groups active in the district include Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), Party Unity (PU), Provisional Central Committee (PCC), and the Liberation group. The district administration lists thirteen blocks, mostly in the northern half, as "Naxalite affected areas". According to the Naxalite groups themselves, they are active in 19 blocks. In addition to mass organisations, the groups maintain, to varying degrees, armed squads.

The mass organisations like the Indian People's Front (IPF), Jan Suraksha Sangharsha Samiti (JSSS), and Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti (MKSS) initially took up wage as the main issue. Gradually, they built a mass movement for re-establishing control over *gair mazurua* land and collection of mahua flowers. Customary extractions and other forms of social domination were effectively challenged by them. The power and violence of notorious estate owners, like Manatu Mauwar, were restricted by these activities. As the strength and effectiveness of these organisations grew, the state and landlords became alarmed.

## COMMUNAL TENSIONS

The most ominous sign of rising communal tensions in recent times in Palamu was the clash in Satbarwa. It originated over a *gair mazurua* piece of land. Mudrika Singh, a Rajput seized a piece of such land adjoining the local *kabristan*, the Muslim graveyard. Muslims comprise 18 percent of and 10 percent of rural population. They are spread mostly in the villages of north Palamu. Ninety two percent of the district's Muslims live in rural areas. Anyhow Mudrika Singh decided to build a house on the *gair mazurua* land and carve out a path from his house through the *kabristan*. When the local Muslims protested, Bajrang Dal and BJP rallied to his support. Although the rise of BJP in the south Bihar plateau is a recent phenomenon, in Palamu it has a longer history. In its earlier incarnation as Bhartiya Jan Sangh, it won one seat in 1967 and four in 1969, all in constituencies reserved for scheduled castes and tribes. Urban traders, rural moneylenders are its main base. In recent assembly elections, the BJP won five out of the nine seats.

The mobilisation by BJP and other organisations created a tension in Satbarwa. On 2 October 1989, when the Muslims prevented them from breaking the *kabristan* wall, rumors of Hindu killings spread. Muslim shops in the market were attacked. Those killed include a school teacher. Police arrested 64 people. Government compensation was given for those killed. Earlier in 1984, after the assassination of former prime minister Indira Gandhi, Sikhs, especially businessmen, were attacked. But timely intervention by the then SP saved many Sikh lives and the situation was brought under control. But after the Satbarwa incidents and circulation of its accounts and rumors, the atmosphere is changing. About eight police station areas are identified as sensitive pockets, six of which fall in BJP strongholds. In all these areas the muslim population is over 30 percent.

The left, including the CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(M-L) and Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini have taken up an active campaign against communal forces in their areas. A Muslim beedi worker of Satbarwa the tensions told us that during the tension only the "*Lal Jhanda ne madad kiya*" (the Red flag helped us).

The first landlord army that came into existence in 1984 was the Kisan Sangh. It was patronised by Bhisim Narain Singh's family and another Congress-I leader, Jogeshwar Tyagi. The Sangh's area of operation was confined to Hussainabad and its surrounding areas. A group of Rajput landlords killed a popular peasant leader Krishna Singh, Secretary of MKSS, in Barhiyadih dalit tola of Majuraha panchayat on 17 June 1984. Later a Bihar PUCL team that investigated the incident established the connivance of local police in the incident. The SP eventually arrested 35 Rajput landlords and their henchmen responsible for the incident. A few months later, in September, MKSS activists were attacked at Kachhra Kainupur village. In the same month when a bonded labourer from Pataria village (P.S. Haidernagar) supported by MKSS, filed a suit against the landlord, he was shot dead. Mass protests, demonstrations were held all over. These sporadic incidents were the first major violent incidents between landlords and labourers in the district. Meanwhile the Kisan Sangh, which never really took a definite shape, died its natural death towards the end of 1984.

But within a year, in the latter half of 1985, another landlord army came up. Known as the Krishak Sevak Samaj, it was active in Chhatarpur, Bishrampur, and Hussainabad. This too was patronised by the Bhisim Narain Singh family. His brother Vijay Bahadur Singh was a leader of this Sena as also of the previous landlord army. Among other leaders were Jogeshwar Singh Tyagi (who was also associated with the earlier army) and Ram Vilas Singh. The group indulged in widespread terror campaign against the

tolas associated with the peasant organisations. In the meantime, police repression against the activities of these organisations was also stepped up. In March 1986, the police opened fire on a demonstration near Chhatapur killing one activist, Siddha Ram.

In April 1986, subsequent to the police firing in Arwal, one of the mass organisations, MKSS, was banned by the state government. Over time, its place was taken by the Jan Mukti Parishad (JMP). In August 1987, in a well known incident, an associate of the JMP, Dr. Bashir Ahmed, was dragged out of his clinic in Tisibar village (Bishrampur block) and was shot dead by the landlords of Krishak Sevak Samaj. In late 1987, at least five JMP workers were killed either by the landlords or by the police. Some activists of other organisations were also reported to have been killed. In April 1988, people of Barwadih village successfully managed to collect mahua from all the trees including those considered to be the landlords'. When they were holding a public meeting the police attacked them. A clash ensued in which a policeman was killed. Police returned with a larger force, raided the village and killed three JMP sympathisers.

In the latter half of 1988, Naxalite groups began a campaign of retaliatory violence. Incidents of attack on the patrolling police parties and snatching their weapons became common. Two of the leading people in the Krishak Sevak Samaj, Tyagi and Ram Vilas Singh, were killed by Naxalites. Social boycott was imposed on many of the landlords associated with the Samaj. Gradually the Samaj retreated. Many of the landlords surrendered their arms and eventually the Krishak Sevak Samaj was lost in oblivion. Its place was taken by the Sunlight Sena which became dominant in early 1989.

## Current Tensions

The struggle for mahua became very strong and effective during the early summer months of 1989. In village after village, people in large numbers collected the flowers amid stiff opposition from the landlords. To some extent it was also a struggle for the control of *gair mazurua* land, which has a number of mahua trees. Large number of villages in Panki and Leslieganj blocks (south of the river Amanat), Bishrampur and Hariharganj (east of the river Koel), and Majhiaon and Garhwa blocks (to the west of Koel) witnessed these struggles. Later during the bhadaï sowing season, campaign for the reoccupation of disputed lands was undertaken. About five hundred acres, in 45 villages spread over four blocks, were thus occupied. It was in this immediate backdrop of successful challenge to the age old social power of the landed gentry that the Sunlight Sena came into operation.

In many respects, the Sunlight Sena differs from earlier such groups. Its influence is spread far and wide in the north Koel valley. One of the reasons for this was its conscious mobilisation on caste lines -- principally Rajput, although landlords of other communities, like the Brahmins, are also lending support to it. In Garhwa, where it originated, in the early days the Sena took out an armed procession through the town and villages with a telling slogan: *sona becho, loha kharido* (sell gold, buy iron, meaning guns), and appealed to Rajputs to join its campaign with arms. The organised caste mobilisation also enabled it to acquire the support of middle and poor farmers of the caste. In fact the Sena is organised on military lines with commanders, assistant commanders, etc. The Sena is led personally by the large estate owners mentioned earlier. It may be recalled that many of them are closely connected with ruling parties which smoothly brought the police on its side. All the major political parties, like the Congress-I, Janata Dal, and the Bhartiya Janata Party, have at least one of its leaders associated with the Sena. In all of these parties, there are sections who oppose such elements. But the state or central leaderships of these parties have never taken any action. In fact, an old generation Congress-I leader, Shri Ganga Prasad, in his conversation with us, was categorical in his uncared for opinion that the

Congress leaders associated with the Sena should be expelled from the party. He aptly described the Sena as "not a party based but a caste and class based organisation". In a sense, the Sunlight Sena can be described as a non-party political formation.

At the field level, the leading commander is Lallan Singh, a landowner turned contractor from Daltonganj. The Sena also engages dacoit groups whose members usually are from the poor and backward castes. The dacoit gangs have their own hostility to the peasant organisations since the latter actively attempt to eliminate dacoity in their areas. Well known among the dacoit groups are those led by Sitaram Paswan and Mukka Mahto. (The latter was earlier expelled from the JMP.)

The Sunlight Sena's attacks began with armed raids on suspected tolas in Garhwa block. Later the raids spread to other areas. In a short span of a fortnight, a large number of villages in Bishrampur block

## ARMS AND THE MAN

Legally policemen, historically landlords and dacoits, and politically Naxalites are the only people who hold and are expected to hold arms. But in Palamu arms are carried by others as well, a feature not perhaps uncommon to many other parts of Bihar.

Dacoit ganga in Palamu, as in other drought prone areas, are part of its history. By and large they consist of dalit or backward caste people who took to arms and looting as a way of life. Some of them are engaged by landlords on occasions in the past. After the emergence of Naxalites, the scene has changed. Some of the dacoits joined the Sunlight Sena. Others indulge in arson, looting and murder and blame it on the Naxalites, confounding a confusing situation of violence. In a more complex case of Mukka Mahto gang, associated with the landlord army Krishak Sevak Samaj, surrendered his arms and joined a Naxalite group in 1988. A few months later as his lumpen activities continued, he was expelled. Subsequently, he joined the Sunlight Sena. The Naxalite squads in Palamu were involved in the annihilation of some landlords and incidents of arms snatching. They are also involved in killing of police informants and controversial cases of political killings that generated hostility in some sections. The Sunlight Sena which is responsible for a large number of the killings, roams around in jeeps, with guns. Some of the guns are licensed. BJP and Bajrang Dal carry arms in their menacing processions against the minorities. The GPI, which is politically opposed to armed struggles, had perforce to bear arms for its rally because of attacks by the Sunlight Sena. The Congress(I) and Dharmendra Bachha also conducted the election campaign with arms in Bishrampur. In any case, ballots and bullets have been going together in Palamu. 14 people were killed in the 1977 elections, 20 in 1984 elections and 23 in 1985 elections in the district.

This situation enables the police to lodge blatantly false cases and persecute legitimate dissidents. The most famous of such cases is that of the local journalist Shambhu Chaurasia. He lives in Daltonganj and contributes to *Aaj* (Ranchi) and *Patliputra* (Patna). He has been consistently involved in filing reports of landlord atrocities both in Daltonganj and in neighbouring Rohtas, his native place. In February 1989, Rohtas police with the help of Palamu police foisted a case of murder on him that took place in Tilaunth village in Rohtas. He was arrested in Daltonganj. He was arrested in Daltonganj on 7 February and was sent to Sasaram jail. Later his brother's house was attacked. After his release on bail, Chaurasia filed cases against landlords. No action was taken on his complaint while the case against him continues.

In a situation where arms are part of everyday social and political mediations, it is the legal process that becomes a farce.

were attacked in October. More severely attacked villages include Kutmu, Pandepur, Lakrahi, Dawarpur, Naukadi, Kajru, Tekhipur, Tisibar. In some cases, as in that of the second attack on Kutmu in November 1989, police also joined them.

In December such an attack took place in Kuari village (Majhiaon). It was one of the villages we visited. A large group of armed landlords of the Sunlight Sena surrounded the dalit tola around 4 p.m. Enroute, they killed Kapil Deo Paswan of neighbouring Mukhapi village. The siege continued for several hours, with intermittent firing. After dark they raided the tola. In Kuari, as in 2500 other villages of Palamu, there is no electricity. The attack was indiscriminate. Men and women were beaten up. Among those severely beaten was Mukhlal, a class VIII student whose brother is a JMP activist. In addition to the beating there was the destruction of household goods. In Mukhlal's house two thalis, two lotas, and a bicycle was smashed, a silver necklace and a blanket were taken away. In Prasad's house jewelry was looted and kitchen utensils were broken. In the house of Birju, a band master by profession, three lotas, three thalis were destroyed and a trumpet, gadasa and Rs. 251. were looted. In Lallu Ram's house, a silver hasuli and payal were taken. In a number of houses, cooking utensils, other household possessions like a transistor radio or a torch, were smashed. Cash, clothes, jewelry and agricultural implements.

Around midnight, the police, having been informed by the landlord before the attack began, came to the dalit tola. They arrested nine people including the young boy Mukhlal and a young woman. According to the police version, an exchange of fire took place between the Sunlight Sena and the Naxalites during which the latter escaped. The police told us that they recovered one rifle from Mukhlal's house. The people told us that the arrested were handed over to the police by the Sunlight Sena. But according to the police, the Sena attackers had escaped by the time they reached and hence no action could be taken against them. At the time of our visit, except for the arrested woman who was given bail, all the others were still lodged in Garhwa jail.

In all these attacks the pattern is the same. A gang of armed Sunlight men surrounds the tola, fires in the air, destroys huts, indulges in arson and looting, forces entry into people's homes wantonly destroying the possessions of the poor: necessities for their daily living and consumption, their dwellings, their scant savings, and their very means of livelihood. Whenever armed gangs of the Sena are in the vicinity, an atmosphere of terror spreads over the villages. We ourselves could not proceed to Tisibar, and were obliged to return to town. The people of the neighbouring villages where we had stopped ask the way to Tisibar were plainly too scared to talk to us since the Sena was known to be roaming the area for the last few days.

A regular feature of Sunlight Sena raids is assault on women. In two of the recorded cases, a kumhar woman labourer was raped by Sena men in Kajru (Bishrampur) in October and a mallah woman was raped in Naukadi (Bishrampur) in December. Whenever the Sena raids a tola the women are subjected to molestation and sexual assault.

However, the main target of the Sunlight Sena's murderous attacks are the activists of the peasant organisations. Amongst the first to be killed were two leading activists of the IPF near Garhwa in July. Later in October, when its focus was shifted to Bishrampur block, two JMP activists of a dalit family were killed in Pandepur and one kumhar labourer, Prasad Prajapati, was killed in Labbarpandu village. In November, two activists, Nagendra Ram and Nath Ram, were killed in Meral police station area. Again in December, Rajaram Mahto (Kuliachakra village), three members of Pal family (Belhara village) were killed in Bishrampur area. Altogether about twenty select activists of peasant organisations were killed by the Sunlight Sena from October 1989 to February 1990.

The attacks of the Sena are not confined to Naxalite mass organisations and their followers. An early incident took place in Gangi village (PS Garhwa) on July 8, 1989. A gang of Sunlight Sena attacked the family of the mallah tola of the village who were engaged in a land struggle organised by the Khet Mazdoor Union of the CPI. Men were beaten up, women molested, and the meagre belongings of the labourers destroyed. Driven out of the village, the people found shelter with some muslim families of

## VILLAGE SIGSIGI

Sigsigi is situated in Rehla P.S. in Bishrampur block on the banks of the Koel river. With a total area of 418 hectares, Sigsigi is a panchayat with 15 caste based tolas. There is much intermixing of castes today in all the tolas except one – Banjara tola where all residents are landless.

The road nearest to the village is at Rehla, 5 kms away and the nearest medical centre is at a distance of 10 kms. The railway station at Sigsigi presently houses a police camp.

The village has 12 hectares of forest land and 47 hectares is either rocky or barren. Another 22 hectares is recorded as culturable waste. Thus not more than 80% of the land is available for cultivation. But not all of this is actually under cultivation. Only 10% of the land is irrigated, of which 18% is done by wells and the rest by "other sources". The wells dry in the hot summer months and the Koel too reduces to a small stream. In bad years, the Koel too dries up. Paddy, the main kharif crop, is sown soon after the monsoons, and a poor rabi crop of wheat, gram or pulses is obtained in some fields.

There is one landlord in the village owning 30 acres and 20 mahua trees – the mukhiya Ram Vriksha Sau. He was the centre of power in the village, giving money and food loans and forcing people to work on his land. When the dalit tola people were digging a well, he got it filled up and demanded a payment of Rs 500. The majority of the families in the village own half to three acres of land and a small number are landless. Approximately 140 acres of *gair mazurua* land close to the river is in the hands of Leela Bachha, a scion of the Nagar Estate. This land was worked by bonded labour brought from outside.

In the lean season people go to work in Rohtas, Gaya and other districts North of the Son. Among such labourers was Ram Prasad Bhuinya who was going to Ara to collect his share of the crop after having worked in harvesting. Simply because he belonged to Sigsigi, he was pulled off the train at Untari Road station and killed by the Sunlight Sena.

Wages are very low in agricultural work – one and a half kgs of grain. During the summer months April-June, only available work is road building and repair of railway lines. In government work, the wages are Rs 15 for men and Rs 13 for women.

In 1984, the Jan Mukti Parishad (JMP) unit was formed in the village. The main issues were wages, distribution of *gair mazurua* land to the landless, stopping of usurious exploitation. In the last seven years wages have been doubled and a large part of the *gair mazurua* land was occupied by the village poor in 1988. The coming of the Sunlight Sena means that these lands are not being sown. The mukhiya moved out to his house and trading business in Rehla when his power was challenged. Now he threatens the villagers when they visit the market at Rehla and himself visits the village with police escort. His son, Lallu Prasad Sau, was a member of the Sunlight Sena when it attacked the village.

On 22 January 1990, a 30-strong gang of this Sena, drunk and armed, entered Jhuria tola at about 3 p.m. searching for the village activist Murari. Not finding him, they beat up the women there, snatched their ornaments, broke household goods and set fire to his house. The police calls Murari a wanted "extremist" and have attached and confiscated his property. The armed gang then beat up people in the nearby weekly *haat* (market). All this time they were intermittently firing in the air. They then went to Garh tola where they shot dead two people who were tending their bullocks. While leaving the village through Belwa Damar (the mukhiya's) tola, they shot Ram Kishen Paswan, a landless labourer, who was feeding his goat. His widow, whose parents are landless labourers in Rauka Bolia, has now five little children to provide for all by herself. The SP and the DC came to the village around 8 p.m. and took away the bodies. It appears, in the spirit of even justice they decided that 15 "extremists" and 15 of the Sunlight Sena should be arrested. But to date only eight people have been charged with murder dacoity and arson. All the accused, still in jail, are labourers from a dalit tola near Bhukhla. According to Sigsigi villagers, none of them had anything to do with the incident.

a neighbouring village, Karcha. The CPI organised a protest meeting in Garhwa. The Party's state secretariat also demanded a ban on the Sunlight Sena. In another instance, in September, near Neora village (Chainpur) the Sena opened fire on a jeep that they suspected was carrying some CPI activists to the mines. A young student of Janata Shivratri College, Parashuram, who was travelling in the jeep was killed. The attackers included Dharmendra Bachha and Vijay Singh (who is also the President of Palamu Youth Congress-I). The body was disposed off by them. Later student, youth and cultural organisations of socialists, CPI, CPI(M), and CPI(M-L) held a joint protest against the killing.

In tune with its character, the Sena did not spare the Janata Dal or the Congress-I some of whose leaders like Avadesh Kumar Singh (JD), Vijay Singh (Cong-I) are associate with it. In August on the day of the Bharat Bandh, Janata Dal leader Giriwar Pandey, who was also the President of Bandhua Mukti Morcha, Palamu, was severely beaten by Dharmendra Bachha. A massive 20,000 strong joint rally of several organisations was held in protest against the Sena. Later Mr. Bachha contested unsuccessfully from the Bishrampur constituency as an independent candidate, backed by the Sunlight Sena, against the official Congress-I candidate. After he had lost he election, he went around with the Sena members, openly carried arms and terrorised the villages which he suspected had voted against him. Yet there was no serious attempt by the police to check Sunlight Sena violence.

The brazenness of the Sena increased as time progressed. Two incidents in particular bring out the character of the Sena and the police collusion with it. In Kuari village, mentioned earlier, in December the local landlords first informed the police of a suspected JMP meeting in the dalit tola. That was part of their informal contact with the local thana as leading landlords. But before the police arrived, the landlords in their incarnation as the Sena attacked the tola. Police followed them later.

More revealing are the repeated attacks on Tisibar village. It may be recalled that Dr. Bashir Ahmed was killed in this village in 1987. On 17 December 1989, the Sena attacked the village and kidnapped four people, three rajwars and one dhobi. Later their bodies were found outside the village. Police, ostensibly to prevent such incidents, stepped up their presence and stationed a patrolling armed camp near the village. By then most of the people who were earlier associated with the JMP had left the village. Among those who remained were an old couple, parents of an activist. In February 1990, the Sena attacked again. They tortured the two old people. The mother's legs were broken and the paralysis stricken father was eventually killed. And then the Sena laid siege and waited for the son to turn up for the funeral. All this went on even though there was an armed police patrol in the immediate vicinity. Eventually, after eight days the Naxalites with the help of neighbouring villagers broke the siege and the body was recovered.

A month later when we visited Palamu, almost all sections of leading citizens, lawyers, journalists, leaders of Chhatra Yuva Sangharsha Vahini, CPI, CPI(M), Marxist Leninist groups, and even some Congress-I and Janata Dal leaders were of the opinion that Sunlight Sena activities must be put an end to. The only person amongst those whom we met who appeared to be unconcerned about the Sena was the Deputy Commissioner, Palamu.

The police and the Sena, in the words of the Congress leader Ganga Prasad, are *mili bhagat*. Facts support this widely shared view. To control the situation in two of the most affected blocks, Bishrampur and Majhiaon, presently there are forty-two armed police camps or patrolling parties. For a while, during the election, three companies of the Bihar military police were also deployed. A number of peasant activists were killed in so called encounters. But this vast armed police force at no point of time in the last fourteen months came across Sunlight Sena men! Altogether in the period from 1988 up until February 1990, 157 cases were launched of which only 12 relate to Sunlight activities. The police bias is clearly revealed by the fact that, while 250 "extremists" have been arrested so far, only 30 persons associated with the Sunlight Sena have been apprehended.

We were able to meet some of these so called extremists at the Daltonganj katcheri. Majority of the 250 people lodged in jails of Daltonganj or Garhwa are poor peasants and landless labourers. Among



the more well known of the accused is Madho Singh, formerly of the JMP, who unsuccessfully contested the assembly election. He was originally arrested from Hana (Bishrampur). Here the JMP had called a panchayat to settle a land dispute. The local landlords were also invited. They brought the police who beat up the people and arrested Sharma. Sharma told us that, while arresting him, the police said, "agar tum hi sab kuchh solve karoge, to hum kya karenge." He was later charged with murder, arson, loot, and dacoity, among other things. Anand Tiwari, Secretary of the JMP, was arrested in August 1989. He was charged with the murder of the mukhiya of Gauhara village (PS Hariharganj). The killing, however, was reported to have been owned by another Naxalite group. Tiwari was picked up from Japla and this case was foisted on him. He was denied bail by the court. In fact, the most commonly used charges in all these cases, like attempt to murder, arson, loot, dacoity, possession of arms, are all charges in which getting a bail is difficult. In case of the poor legal aid and provisions of security for the bail are also difficult. As a result they languish in jail for long periods. In some instances, fresh cases have been foisted on people in jail for the offences committed elsewhere while these were already in prison. Prison conditions also seem to be horrible. Most of the accused are brought to the prison after heavy torture. Even though they are undertrials, they are forced to work or give cash. While we were in Palamu, a prisoner was handcuffed and hung upside down from a tree in the jail compound because he had refused to work. Those who protested against this were themselves beaten up. The prisoners went on a hunger strike.

In sharp contrast, almost all of the thirty arrested Sunlight Sena associates appear to have been let out on bail, presumably back to their gangs. Further, none of the leaders, including the famous Nagar estate raja, Dharmendra Bachha, who was involved in so many notorious instances, were charged with any offence. The state and the Sena collusion thus is complete and absolute.

## Conclusion

The state and Sunlight Sena collusion is eloquently illustrated by the opinions expressed and arguments advanced by Shri Upendra Sinha, Deputy Commissioner(DC) and Shri Kapil Deo, Superintendent of Police (SP), Palamu. Legally, it is the responsibility of the DC to enforce state policy and ensure the redistribution of the government owned *gair mazurua* land to the weaker section. But on the contrary when a social conflict develops over that land between its illegal usurpers and the people, Mr. Sinha professes to treat them equally. The agrarian conflict in his view becomes 'a law and order problem created by a fight between two gangs, the Sunlight and the Naxalites'. This parity imposed on landlords and peasants, however, is not reflected when it comes to the actual maintenance of law and order. While in village after village the limited stocks of grain and the small but precious little household goods of the people, their only possessions, get destroyed and looted, the landlords are allowed to usurp the land of others including that of the government. Sena men rarely get arrested. But agricultural labourers and poor peasants -- the "extremists" -- are persecuted through false cases. The SP in his interview could not recall the name of a single Sena accused while he was very well informed about the 'extremists and their violence'. He even advanced a reason for his selective memory and said that leaders of Sena are never personally involved but only employ their henchmen and hence no cases are registered against them. And this after massive protest took place against the Sena violence in which its leaders Dharmendra Baccha and Vijay Singh personally participated. When the poor people get killed not even the formal legal procedure is initiated and the cases are never registered. The terror unleashed by the Sena is never checked and its murders go unrecorded. But recently, subsequent to our visit, the government announced that a company of para-military forces is being moved into Palamu to check 'the extremist activities'.

This announcement followed what the news papers reported as 'an attack on the granaries of Ranka rajas by three hundred armed extremists in which four people including Bhanu Pratap Singh Deo were killed'. (Ranchi, PTI, 15 April) Thus in Palamu even the legitimate government duties, like maintaining law and order, became illegitimate.

The brazen inequities of the law and order mechanism are in fact rooted in the larger state policies. The forest and irrigation policies pursued over a long period of time make Palamu a region of perpetual scarcity. The drought squeezes further the people condemned to subsistence living and it makes landlords extend their control over common property resources. The government launches special programmes for the development of the region as a whole and for the weaker sections in particular. Irrigation, afforestation, soil conservation, water management, road and other construction works, Jawahar Rozgar Yojana -- a host of such schemes, to which crores of rupees are allocated, come into existence. All of them only help generate more contracts for the landlords enhancing their power and their ability to suppress the poor through organised violence. When people organise and protest, the law and order mechanism and the law courts step in to further strengthen these inherent inequities.

Drought does not strike like lightning, nor bury like an earthquake nor sweep away like a flood. In Palamu it grew slowly and tortuously, over a long period of time, out of state policies and social institutions. The ecological conditions and social inequities have been shaped and strengthened by each other. In the process the erstwhile feudal lords have subjugated all modern democratic institutions, rewritten their discourse and delineated the course of politics of Palamu. The present struggle of the peasants for mahua, for fair wages, and for *gair mazurua* land is a part of the struggle for a more humane and democratic society.

Bihar is India's second largest state with its population of more than 70 million spread over 40 districts. Its divided into three natural regions: the north Bihar plains located north of the river Ganga; the south Bihar plains lying south of the river and the Chhotanagpur plateau. The south Bihar plains have been the scene of agrarian conflict between the landed gentry and the peasants for more than a decade now. PUDR has conducted investigations in Patna district in 1981 (AGRIAN UNREST IN PATNA); in Jehanabad twice in 1983, with APDR (POLICE REPRESSION IN JEHANABAD) and with Bihar PUCL (JEHANABAD: Peasant Movement and Police Repression); in Aurangabad in 1985 (KAITHI BIGHA MASSACRE -- a report); and in Patna and Gaya in 1986 (BEHIND THE KILLINGS IN BIHAR). In Chhotanagpur the social contradictions are informed by the conflict between the workers and the industrial managements and trade union mafias, between adivasis and the foresters and between adivasis and the non-adivasi outsiders. PUDR investigated in Singhbhum in 1979 (REPRESSION IN SINGHBHUM); in Santhal Paraganas in 1983 (SAHARJORI -- Abandoned Miners of Santhal Parganas); and once again in Singhbhum in 1986 as part of its investigation, Behind the Killings in Bihar. PUDR also chronicled a documentary report on the political killings in Bihar from 1980 to 1983 (AND QUIET FLOWS THE GANGA), and again for the period 1983-86 (CHRONOLOGY OF KILLINGS IN BIHAR). Recently PUDR also investigated the communal riots in Bhagalpur (BHAGALPUR RIOTS).

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