

BITTER HARVEST

The Roots of Massacres in Central Bihar



People's Union for Democratic Rights
Delhi
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ये फसल उमीदों की हमदम
इस बार भी ग़ारत जायेगी
सब मेहनत, सुब्हों शामों की
अब के भी अकारत जायेगी
खेतों के कोनों, खुदरों में
फिर अपने लहु की खाद भरो
फिर मिट्टी सींचो अश्कों से
फिर अगली रत की फ़िक्र करो
फिर अगली रत की फ़िक्र करो
जब फिर इक बार उजड़ना है
इक फ़सल पकी तो भर पाया
जब तक तो यही कुछ करना है

— फ़ैज़ अहमद फ़ैज़

On 21 September 1991, seven landless labourers were picked up and brought to village Sawanbigha, in Jehanabad, and killed by members of the Savarna Liberation Front.

Two days later, in another incident, seven poor dalit villagers were gunned down by members of the Kisan Sangh at Karkatbigha, Paiiganj, in Patna district.

Seven members of a family of sharecroppers in Tindiha, a settlement of Ramdohar panchayat, in Gaya, were dragged out of their houses in the middle of the night of 1 October. Their throats were slit. The Sunlight Sena is believed to have perpetrated this attack.

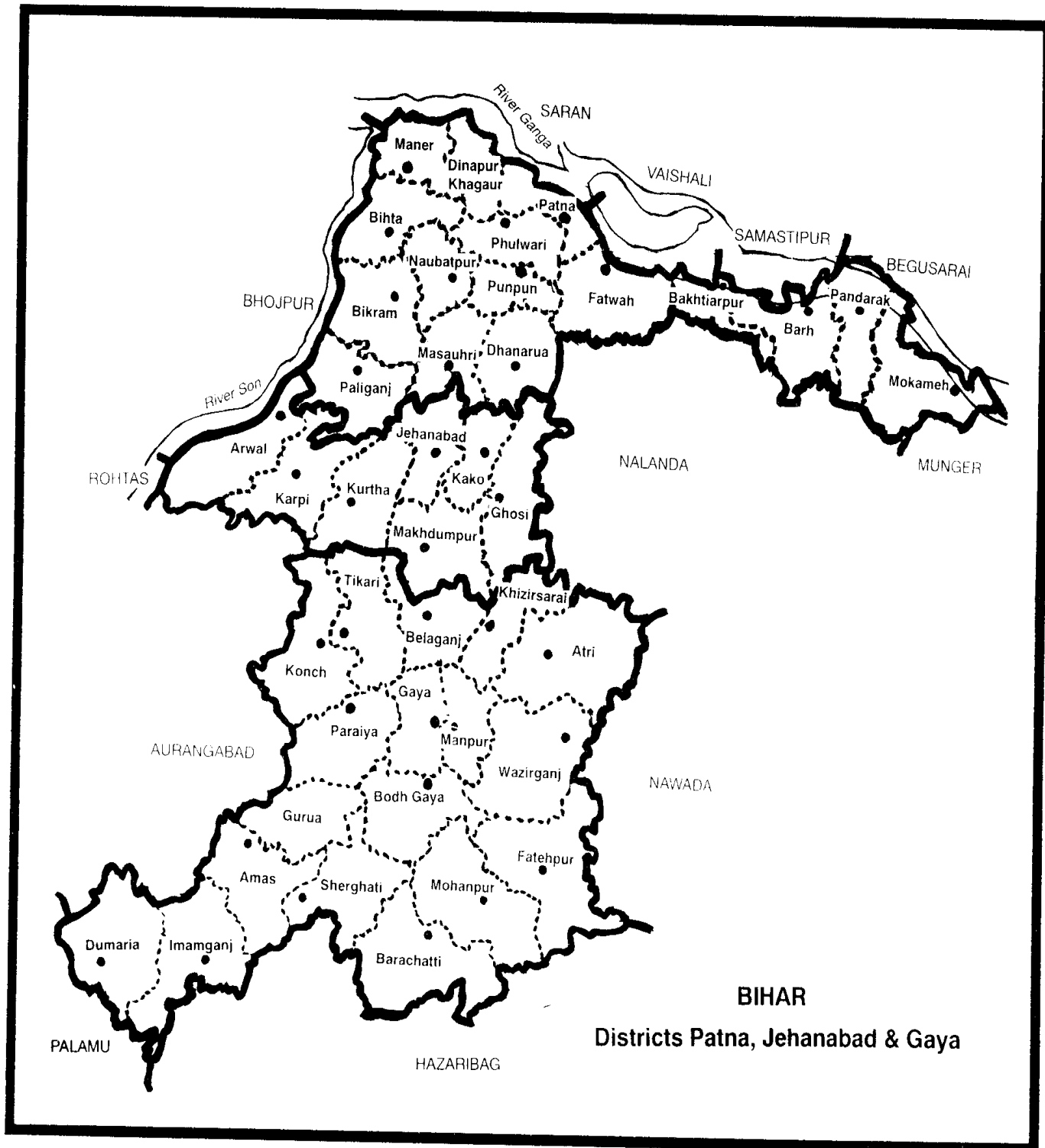
The dalit tolas of Men and Barsiwan, in Gaya, were attacked by members of the Savarna Liberation Front on the night of 23 December. Ten persons were killed.

36 bhumihar landowners were killed on the night of 12 February 1992, at Bara in Gaya. The Maoist Communist Centre has claimed responsibility for these killings.

The last incident of large scale killing in rural Bihar stands in stark contrast to the others not only in terms of the number of persons killed, but because those executing the killings were drawn from the landless, comprising dalits and poor peasants.

From the time of the killing of 14 dalits at Tiskhora on 19 January last year, more than 120 persons have been killed in about 24 such incidents of agrarian violence against the poorest and most oppressed sections of rural Bihar. Popularly perceived to be manifestations of a caste war that is rife in this state, or else passed off as instances of atrocities against dalits, these incidents have become part of the mythology of this peculiar entity called rural Bihar. The reality, however, is rooted in the brutal manner in which power is exercised and maintained in rural Bihar, the forms in which such domination is being contested, and the violence of the attempts to crush any challenge to the existing balance of rural power. Battle lines have been drawn. On one side are the private senas, and ranged against them are Marxist-Leninist groups of the region who are leading the labouring poor to assert their right to a better life and livelihood. The government, political parties, the press and media too have become implicated in this conflict.

The People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) investigated some of these incidents in the districts of Patna, Jehanabad, and Gaya between 27 March and 3 April 1992. The team visited villages Akuri in Patna, Karamchibigha, Narayanpur, Aikil, Jhitkoria, Parsona, and Dharnai in Jehanabad and, Men, Barsiwan, Bara, Dihura, Tindiha and Narayanpur in Gaya. It met the activists of the organisations active in the region — Lok Sangram Morcha, Indian People's Front and the Jan Suraksha Sang-harsh Manch. The team also interviewed the heads of the civil and police administration at the district level.



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The Region

South of the river Ganga and north of the Chhotanagpur plateau in Bihar, lies the region that is variously referred to *as* the central plains or the south Bihar plains. It comprises the districts of Bhojpur, Rohtas, Aurangabad, Patna, Jehanabad, Gaya, Na-wada, Nalanda, Munger, and Bhagalpur. In the middle of the central plains covering the entire expanse from the Ganga to the Chhotanagpur plateau, lie the three districts of Patna, Jehanabad, and Gaya.

Most of this region consists of plains with an alluvial soil having a slight slope from south to north. There are some low hill ranges in the southern and eastern parts of Gaya, which are extensions of the plateau regions of Palamu and Hazaribag. These hills are covered by brushwood forests and comprise the only forests in the three districts. Many rivers, such as Punpun, Phalgu, Dardha and Jamuna flow through the central plains to empty themselves into the Ganga. After entering the plain areas, they break out into numerous small streams that criss-cross the districts of Jehanabad and Gaya. The river Son forms the north-western border of this region with neighbouring Bhojpur district.

Agriculture is the main economic activity in this region. About 82 percent of the workers in the central plains depend on cultivation for a livelihood. Those who do civil work or ply rickshaws in the towns, too, have their families residing in the villages.

Of the three districts visited, Jehanabad is the most agriculturally developed, having 91 percent of the total village area under cultivation. The main crops grown in these areas are paddy in the kharif season and pulses (mainly khesari) and wheat in the rabi season. The three crops together account for two-fifths of the total gross cropped area. The eastern portions of these districts are better irrigated. Patna and Jehanabad obtain most of their water from the Son river, and Gaya is irrigated by canals from the seasonal rivers that enter it from Hazaribag and Palamu districts. The Son canal system, inherited from colonial times, is now showing the effects of inadequate maintenance and erosion of the river bed. Despite the dependence on it being as high as 90 percent of the irrigated area in blocks such as Arwal, this source of irrigation is becoming increasingly precarious. But in general the tapping of groundwater resources for irrigation has made a perceptible difference. Much of this is accounted for by pumpsets installed by landowners themselves rather than government operated tube wells. Wells, both with as well as without power, account for more than a quarter of the total irrigated land in the three districts. The dependence on ground water is highest in Patna where more than half the irrigated land is watered from such sources.

The developments in irrigation, however, leave much to be desired. Assured sources such as canals and tubewells are restricted to a small area in each district. In some blocks assured sources are virtually non-existent, and in many places where the government has installed tubewells, they are badly in need of repair. Thus it is not strange that six out of the seven drought prone districts in Bihar are part of the central plains.

A substantial amount of land — 14 percent in Patna, 29 percent in Jehanabad, and 48 percent in Gaya is irrigated by traditional methods referred to as "other sources" in official documents. These comprise mainly ahaars and pynes. Ahaars are reservoirs formed by blocking streams while pynes are a network of channels. Both these are rainwater storage mechanisms that are operative only for a few months after the such as Dumariya in Gaya district, these traditional methods account for as much as 86 percent of the irrigated land. In areas where assured sources of irrigation have become available, such sources have shown a steady decline. But even in areas where no modern irrigation facilities are available, ahaars and pynes are falling into disuse. During the colonial period, these common property resources had been kept in working condition by forced labour. However, after zamindari abolition, these community resources fell into a state of disrepair since no single landowner had a direct stake in their upkeep. Further, the pynes and ahaars, being systems of storing water, take up substantial amounts of land in the village. The silting of these sources, and the increasing pressure to bring more land under the plough, has also opened these commons for cultivation and resulted in an increase in agrarian tensions. Apart from some marginal developments in irrigation, and the introduction of the green revolution technology, there have been no other major developments in agriculture. Production and productivity have remained stagnant, if not actually deteriorating, during the eighties. The industrial base too is weak, thus inhibiting the use of modern technology. In fact, there has hardly been any industrial growth in the central plains in the last 40 years. The abysmal record of development in the belt has thrown up a culture of crime and lumpenism. Far from being an idiosyncratic characteristic of rural Bihar, this culture is embedded in the structure of development of the region.

The region has a long history of rural mobilisation. From the popular support to the rebellion of the Danapur regiment at the time of the Great Mutiny to the twenties of this century, the countryside in this belt has been the site of simmering conflicts. The past decade and a half witnessed the emergence and spread of a number of peasant organisations that are affiliated with various Marxist-Leninist groups. Even the briefest examination of the agrarian history of the area from the 1920s reveals that these left-wing peasant organisations are the first to have focussed on the problems affecting the oppressed sections, including landless labourers, sharecroppers and marginal farmers, in a substantive rather than a rhetorical sense. These sections have

consistently been ignored both by organisations claiming to represent the interests of the peasantry, such as Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS), that operated in the area in the last two decades before independence, and by successive governments during the post colonial period.

The History of Rural Mobilisation

The zamindari system of land tenure governed the area during the colonial period. The focus of tensions in this period was around the oppressive exactions and feudal privileges claimed by the zamindars from their tenantry. The landlords were mainly from the upper castes, including rajputs and bhu-mihars. The tenants constituted middle cultivating castes—yadavs, kurmis, and koeries apart from some drawn from the upper castes.

The BPKS, established in 1929, and later the All India Kisan Sabha, became the principal instruments of agrarian protest against the inequities of the zamindari system before independence. They were the plank on which the middle caste tenants consolidated their position in rural society by resisting the domination of upper caste landlords. Notwithstanding declarations of concern for the oppression experienced by all those who were subjected to the feudal domination of the zamindars, from occupancy tenants on one extreme to agricultural labourers on the other, the BPKS tended to devote its energies only to a few relatively privileged classes of tenants cultivating land immediately below the zamindars. On the one hand it mobilised occupancy tenants around grievances centering on high rents and the use of extra-economic coercion to extract forced labour (*begar*) and illegal exactions (*abwabs*). On the other hand it mobilised the category of tenants who cultivated land under the direct charge of zamindars (*bakasht* land). They were tenants, without occupancy rights, who were subjected to exorbitant produce rents and were vulnerable to eviction. The protection of the position of such tenants, especially in Patna, Gaya, and Munger, was a major plank in the agitations launched by the BPKS.

By confining the articulation of grievances to the upper layers of the tenantry, the BPKS excluded from its agenda the oppression experienced by the lower layers of the agrarian hierarchy, including tenants-at-will who were usually sharecroppers (*bataidars*) and agricultural labourers. Ironically, such elements of the agrarian population were oppressed by the very tenants who protested against the iniquities of zamindari. The failure to include these elements in the political agenda also meant the neglect of issues of social oppression, for the lower layers of the agrarian hierarchy comprised to a significant extent low castes, such as julaha, kahar and rajbhar and dalits, such as chamar, dusadh and musahar. The gulf between these groups and the upper tenantry, drawn mainly from upper castes, such as rajput and bhumihar and middle castes, such as yadav, kurmi and koiri, was widened even further by the aggressive attempts by these middle castes, especially the yadavs, to improve their social status by resisting the humiliating customs that reinforced their

subordination to the zamindars. From about 1914, yadav, kurmi and koiri associations were formed, which coalesced in 1934 under the banner of the Triveri Sangh. The yadavs in Patna district, for example, asserted their right to wear the sacred thread, refused to render begar, and withdrew their women from appearing in public places, such as bazaars, to sell milk. By centre-staging the relatively privileged elements of the agrarian social order such movements resulted in accentuating the social oblivion of those who constituted the oppressed.

Along with the BPKS, the Congress has had a formidable presence in central Bihar. To a large extent the Congress in Bihar was dominated by small zamindars and the upper layers of the tenantry who themselves controlled vast tracts of land. The sensitivity of the party to agrarian issues was inhibited by this basic fact. In this connection it should be pointed out that the agrarian programme of the Indian National Congress, spelt out at the Faizpur session in 1936, tended to emphasise issues affecting mainly the recorded tenantry, or those explicitly deemed to be tenants, and failed to concern itself with the subordinate sections of the agrarian population. None of the 13 guidelines for agrarian reform issued to the provincial Congress committees reflected any awareness of the unique oppression of the lower agrarian strata. Given its class base, it is hardly surprising that the perspective of the Bihar Congress on agrarian issues was as limited as that of the national party organisation. By and large, the party conceived of the agrarian structure as comprising primarily two major classes: zamindars and the tenantry immediately below them.

The capacity of the Congress to pilot issues of social oppression was also hindered by the compelling need to project itself as a multi-interest party, attempting to bring about social harmony between classes. This is apparent from the statement made by Sri Krishan Sinha, Prime Minister of the provincial government formed in Bihar under the Government of India Act, 1935:

Government is anxious that there should *be perfect harmony* between the landlords and the tenants prevailing in this country. It wants that both these classes *should meet on the spiritual plane* and consider things affecting their relationship from the point of view of duty.

(Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Bihar, Vol I, 1937, Government of Bihar.. 1938, p. 1927, emphasis added)

The emphasis on social harmony by the Congress was an essential ingredient of its programme to oust the British. Implied here was an assumption that the necessity to transform existing structures of exploitation and impart to the oppressed an equal stake in the post-colonial nation could be postponed till *swaraj* had been attained. It was in effect a statement in favour of the status quo. A telling comment on the partisan role of the Congress comes from within the party, in the bitter declaration made by Bhola Paswan Shastri, a former chief minister of Bihar, "*agar swaraj hoga to garibon ka nahin hoga*" (*if swaraj is*

achieved, it will not be for the poor) (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 (43), 1986, p. 1902.)

Thus both nationalist politics with its strong allegiance to the rural landlords and the explicitly anti-landlord BPKS failed to address the need for radical social transformation, and left the lives of the labouring poor unchanged. But the same process of mobilisation was also responsible for the emergence of a *section* from among the middle and backward caste tenantry in opposition to the traditional stranglehold of the upper caste landlords. With the land reforms of the fifties this section of the former tenantry began to gain control over land and also grew in strength and status.

The land reforms programme, thus, consolidated the position of those who had possessed secure rights in land as occupancy tenants, who came to constitute the new elite in the countryside — the new *maliks* (a traditional expression denoting employers of labour belonging to dominant castes). They had a wider social base than that of the traditional zamindars whom they had eclipsed as they included sections from the middle castes. These new elites also succeeded in harnessing the possibilities opened up by the introduction of the state sponsored green revolution strategy in the late sixties. Further, they entered the fray in the arena of electoral politics and became powerful contenders to landlord lobbies and interests. In a sense the rise to dominance of the Janata Dal in the state marks the coming of age of the middle caste elements among them as a political force in present-day Bihar.

As the record of massacres in the Laloo Prasad Yadav regime bears testimony, the slogan of social justice notwithstanding, the new government like that of the Congress before it, has been unable to tackle the issues affecting the lives of the oppressed. The magnitude and brutality of oppression experienced by the poor under the new regime has not abated.

Social Contradictions: Land, Labour and Dignity

While large landowners are rare in this belt, only 4 percent of the rural households here own more than 10 acres of land — the breakup of the old estates, such as the Tikari estate in north Gaya, has paved the way for the emergence of some rural magnates. Among them is Mahendra Singh of Chattiana, owning over 680 acres, forged from the former Tikari estate, and Tilak Singh from Makhdum-pur owning about 450 acres. The latter, an important BJP leader, also dabbles in transport and trading activities. While there is definite diversification of the economic interests of the large landowners in this belt, control over land remains a crucial determinant of economic power.

However the exercise of power in the countryside is not explicable in terms of economic factors alone. Caste plays an important role in structuring agrarian relations. As shown in the Table 1, 90 percent of the rural

households own less than 5 acres of land or are landless. Of the 10 percent who dominate the control of land, a substantial proportion of 72 percent are drawn from the upper castes. While the dominance of upper castes is undeniable, any simplistic collapse of the category of large landowners with upper castes is misleading: about 18 percent of the large landowners and 21 percent of those owning between 5-10 acres belong to the upper middle and other middle castes. The social base of those who dominate the agrarian class structure is thus *wider* than the upper castes. There is no uniformity in the exact caste groupings dominating a particular region. For example, in Punpun, Masaurhi and Dhanarua blocks in Patna district, the principal landowners are kur-mis; in Naubatpur and Bikram they are bhumi-har-, and in Pali they include yadavs, bhumi-hars and koeris. In Jehanabad, bhu-mihars and kurmis constitute the landed elite. Finally, in south Gaya, rajputs and pathans are dominant.

LAND AND CASTE IN THE BIHAR PLAINS						
Table 1: Caste wise Breakup of each Landholding Category						
Size of Holding (in acres)	Caste Categories					
	Upper	Upper Middle	Other Middle	Scheduled	Muslim	All
Landless	2.9	13.1	23	43.9	17.1	100 (43.1)
Less than 5	29.3	30.6	13	17.6	9.5	100 (47.0)
5 – 10	69	20.7	0	0.5	9.7	100 (5.8)
Above 10	77.4	11.6	6	0	4.9	100 (4.1)
Table 2: Breakup by Landholding size of each Cast Category						
Caste Category	Size of Holding (in acres)					
	Landless	Less than 5	10-May	Above 10	All	
Upper Caste	5.7	62.1	17.9	14.3	100 (22.2)	
Upper Middle Caste	25.9	66.4	5.5	2.2	100 (21.7)	
Other Middle Caste	60.9	37.6	0	1.5	100 (16.3)	
Scheduled Caste	69.5	20.4	0.1	0	100 (27.2)	
Muslim	58.6	35.4	4.4	1.6	100 (12.6)	

Note:1. All figures in percentages.

2. Upper caste refers to Brahmin, Rajput, Bhumi-har and Kayastha.
3. Upper middle caste refers to yadav, kumii and koeri.
4. Other middle caste includes all hindus not included in upper, upper middle and Scheduled Caste categories.

Source: International Labour Office and A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Sciences empirical study in 1981 as quoted in *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 (33), 1991.

The profitability of cultivation, especially in areas of assured irrigation, has contributed significantly to the relegation of traditional forms of tenancy to the background, and also to the increasing importance of cultivation through hired labour. In addition to being among the agriculturally more developed districts of the state, Patna, Jehanabad and Gaya also reveal the highest proportion of agricultural labourers. Between 43 and 46 percent of rural main workers derive their principal means of livelihood by cultivating the lands of others, (see Table 3).

In order to have an assured supply of labour (*mazdoors*), landowners may make use of both traditional and modern strategies. On the one hand, by advancing loans to ploughmen (*harwaha*), the services of the latter are assured for the duration of a season. Since it is not uncommon for fresh debts to be incurred to meet consumption needs or medical expenses, *liarwahas* even today continue to be attached to the same *maliks* year after year as *lagua mazdoor* (attached labourers). Nowadays these contracts are normally for the period of a year, and terms are negotiated again at the time of the monsoons before the commencement of the next cropping cycle. In some villages, such as Bara, the tying of labour is only for a season. Loans of Rs. 500 in the month of Jyaistha (May-June) are sufficient to bind labour from the ploughing period until transplantation is over. Such short-term arrangements preclude the need to temper such *malik-mazdoor* relations with any form of paternalism. More commonly, however, *harwahas* are given plots of land of between 0.25-0.375 acres on which they can cultivate for their own consumption.

On the other hand, labourers may be recruited on a casual basis - the *chhutta mazdoor*. Both categories of labourers continue to toil within a highly exploitative framework of social relations. Wages in these districts are lower than elsewhere. Whereas in Rohtas 4 kg. of rice is the normal daily wage, in Patna, Jehanabad, and Gaya wages vary from 2 kg to 2.5 kgs of rice normally. A *harwaha's* wages are even lower. In the villages near Akuri and at Bara it is as low as 1 kg. rice. At harvest, labour receives a one-twelfth share as compared to one-tenth in Rohtas. Along with grain the labourer is normally given a meal of *sattu* (coarse grain or pulses which are roasted and ground). While earlier *sattu* was made from bengal gram, now *sattu* is mainly made from a mixture of wheat and *khesadi*, a cheaper pulse.

A possible explanation of variations in wages is the ability of landowners to prevent a rise in wages as well as to curb the mobility of the labouring households. This ability rests on the power exercised by the employer. Thus in Dumaria, Gaya, the dominant rajput/pa-than landowners pay only 2 kucha seers of grain (1.3 kg.) while those of other castes give 2 kg. of grain for a day's labour.

In south Gaya the pattern of production relationships is different. This tract appears to conform to the pattern in the neighboring district of Palamu, where a relatively few rajputs and pathans control enormous amounts of land, up to 750 acres, spread over several villages. Such *maliks* retained only about 4 acres for cultivation under their charge, and leased out the rest to *bataidars* under the traditional, exploitative conditions, requiring the latter to bear the entire cost of production and surrender half the produce as rent. Therefore, in these tracts, the principal antagonism is between *maliks* and *bataidars* rather than between *malik* and *mazdoor*.

About 27 percent of the population of these districts belong to the scheduled castes such as chamars, musahars and dusadhs (see Table 2). These castes are traditionally debarred from holding land. They are the dispossessed who are forced to labour for others because of the denial of access to the principal means of production. Among them, musahars happen to be the most backward. More than two-thirds of the scheduled caste households do not own any land. Nearly half the landless labourers in the region belong to these castes.

Acquisition of rights to landownership thus is not simply a material benefit but also a symbolic statement of social prestige for the dalit who has traditionally been denied access to land. The allotment of land, in particular *gair mazarua* land (common land technically under the control of the government see Box: The Land in Question) under the illegal occupation of powerful *maliks* is one of the critical sources of tension, especially in Jehanabad and Gaya. With the increase in productivity through the seventies and the shift to the highly profitable cultivation of wheat, more and more commons and wastes have been brought under the plough. In addition, the filling up of ahaars and pynes, and their gradual falling into disuse and disrepair, has created new common lands where cultivation is possible due to the large scale tapping of groundwater resources. Control over such lands is a live issue of contention with landless and dalit households staking a claim on these lands.

The highly vulnerable position of agricultural labourers is accentuated by caste oppression. Its rationale transcends purely economic issues focussing on wages and land and includes the tangible issue of *izzat* or dignity. Subservience enforced by social norms has served as a basis of domination.

The stark nature of subservience can be seen even from the structure of the village — the main settlement at the centre and the harijan tolas on the outskirts in the middle of the fields. The tolas are the centre of productive activity but are marginal to society. The forms of oppression are many and varied: a dalit cannot sit when an upper caste landowner passes by, or wear a watch, play a radio, or even wear a shirt; they cannot live in pucca

houses; their women are sexually abused, abducted and raped. Feudal norms sanction customs like the dola, which force dalit brides to spend their wedding night with the local *malik*. Dalit women are subjected to particularly humiliating treatment while working in the field.

The Land in Question

An outstanding example of the manner in which the courts protect the interests of the strong against those of the weak is their handling of the illegal possession of *gair mazarua* land. Before the abolition of zamindari in Bihar, such land was outside the domain of estates settled with zamindars, and was technically under the government. The land was meant for community use, such as grazing cattle, collecting fodder, cremating the dead, and as sites for temporary markets (*haaty*). However, given the power exercised by zamindars, they acquired *de facto* control over tracts of *gair mazarua* land. Such lands were denoted as *gair mazarua khas* (common lands under the control of a particular *malik*) in the land records in order to distinguish them from *gair mazarua aam* (lands which remained common). With the passage of time, zamindars leased out portions of *gair mazarua khas* land (henceforth GMK). Such transfers, in a sense, further consolidated the *de facto* power of zamindars over GMK land, for the power to settle such land really lay with the government. However, this *de facto* control over GMK land remained virtually unchallenged as long as the zamindari system of land tenure was in existence.

After the abolition of zamindari, the former zamindars ceased to have any locus standi with regard to GMK land, the control over which could, in principle, be recovered by the government. Though, in accordance with the current policy of the Bihar government, such land is intended for distribution among the landless belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there is a major hurdle in securing control over the tracts settled by zamindars with various individuals. At the time of passing of the Bihar Land Reforms Act (1950), zamindars were required to submit returns of the GMK land transferred by them. The claims of those holding such land, backed by returns submitted by the zamindars prior to 1965 cannot be legally challenged, since a provision had been made in the law allowing zamindars to settle GMK land and the local circle officer had the power to open jamabandis (revenue accounts) in any persons name. This practice was disallowed after 1965. However, according to the D.M., in many instances no returns had been filed by zamindars, and therefore the recipients had no proof to support their possession of GMK land. Even so, scarcely any initiative had been shown by the administration to recover and redistribute such land. Efforts when made have been rendered futile because the recipients have challenged the intended takeovers in court. Ironically, the courts have upheld their claims without ascertaining whether returns to support them had been filed by the zamindars concerned. Incidentally, the D.M. Jehanabad told the team that two cases ("test cases", as he put it), where the illegal occupation of about 60 acres of GMK land by Tilak Singh in Umta and Mahendra Singh in Chhatiana was being challenged by the district administration, were pending in the High Court. He added that if the administration lost the cases in the High Court, they would appeal to the Supreme Court!

Whether this experiment is successful or not, the organisations of the rural poor are forcibly taking over *gair mazarua* land and distributing it among the landless. While the administration maybe a mute spectator to these struggles that are effectively implementing its laws, the *maliks* and their private senas have been brutally thwarting these struggles. In Narayanpur, Jehanabad, after the seizure of 3.5 acres of *gair mazarua* land under the leadership of the MKSS struggles, the SLF wrought vengeance by killing three dalits from this village at Sawanbigha. The land remains in dispute.

Census data reveals that more than two-thirds of the female rural main workers in Patna, Jehanabad and Gaya work as agricultural labourers (see Table 3). This is a considerably higher proportion than that of agricultural labourers among male main workers. The overwhelmingly large proportion of agricultural labourers among working women reflects as much the feudal patriarchal mores which keep upper caste women at home as it does the desperate compulsions under which others are forced into the labour market, since it is only the landless dalit households and those of backward castes among whom women seek work outside. Even the backward caste and dalit families force women to stop work in the fields as soon as they can afford to do so. While this might be a manifestation of the internalisation of the patriarchal norms of the upper castes as they ascend the agrarian hierarchy, it is also a reaction to the accentuated nature of oppression faced by women who work in the fields, for it is they who bear the full brunt of class, caste and gender oppression.

Occupation	Patna		Jehanabad		Gaya		Bihar	
	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F
Cultivators	39.41	17.7	44.29	24.54	45.68	29.26	47.66	33.05
Agricultural labour	45.49	75.18	44.49	69.82	43.71	66.74	40.39	60.12
Household Industry	2.6	2.21	2.49	2.02	2.08	1.37	2.27	2.56
Other	12.5	4.91	8.73	3.62	8.53	2.63	9.68	4.27
All	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: P refers to persons; F refers to females
Source: Census of India, 1991.

The basic contradictions in the concerned districts, therefore, cannot be collapsed simplistically into the obvious and undeniable polarization between upper caste/ class and lower caste/class. Such a representation fails to comprehend the role of those drawn from the middle rungs of the rural hierarchy as major actors on the agrarian scene. Not only do these middle rungs span the entire range of castes, from rajputs and bhumihars to backward castes and harijans, but they also span the various levels of the rural hierarchy from oppressor to oppressed. Over 25 percent of the upper middle caste households and more than 60 percent of those from other middle castes are landless, even while sections from these castes have scooped the cream of the land reform programme and reaped substantial benefits from the green revolution (Table 2). A sense of the importance of landownership, even of a mere half acre, in underwriting the social power deployed through caste status, can be gus-aged from the fact that 3/4 of the upper middle caste households are landed while less than 40 percent of the other middle caste households own any land (Table 2). Further, other middle castes constitute a

higher proportion of the landless and a smaller proportion of those with holdings of less than 5 acres (Table 1).

The neo-rich elements, drawn from yadav, kurmi and koiri castes, are as oppressive in relation to the rural poor as their upper caste counterparts. Thus the private militias of the 1980s associated with the kurmis and yadavs (Bhoomi Sena and Lorik Sena respectively) were as notorious . as those associated with rajputs and bhumihars (Kuer Sena and Brahmarshi Sena respectively). According to a crime investigation report, backward castes accounted for a death toll of 179 persons (including 75 dalits) in massacres in the period between 1976-1989. 7 In the same period 102 persons were killed by forward castes. Dalits were aggressors in only three incidents claiming 14 lives. During this period 166 dalits were killed in attacks by upper and backward castes.

Violence seems to characterise the routine exercise of power and domination in this belt. It is the substance of oppression, and the basis of polarisation of rural society.

The Substance of Oppression

The extent of control over land, the principal means of production, and the extent of the use of hired labour in relation to family labour in farm operations are the bases of the schemes for understanding peasant differentiation adopted by Marxist-Leninist organisations. Folio wing from these two criteria, a five-fold classification of the agrarian population is made: at one extreme are *landlords* who have abundant land and live entirely on the labour of others to cultivate it; at the other extreme are *landless labourers*, whose livelihood depends entirely on working for others. In between landlords and labourers are three classes *of peasants; rich, middle and poor*. Rich peasants produce an abundant marketable surplus and, unlike landlords, may perform some manual work in farm operations; middle peasants by and large operate at the level of subsistence and depend mainly on the use of family labour; and poor peasants depend heavily on hiring themselves out since their holdings are insufficient for a livelihood. In terms of this scheme, then, the basic cleavage in rural society is between landlords and rich peasants on the one hand, and poor peasants and landless labourers on the other.

The ground reality of the nature of conflicts and the bases of power and domination in the village suggest that the polarisation of rural society is not explicable only in these economic terms. The exercise of power crucially revolves around the assertion of social status the subordination of others through a denial of self respect and a life of dignity. Caste identities condition the pattern and process of differentiation. These identities could create contradictions within each class of the above scheme or forge alliances

across them. What it means crucially for those resisting and fighting oppressive structures is that the propensity to exploit and oppress the labouring poor is not associated with large landholdings alone.

The perceptions of those who are at the receiving end of oppression and the actual practice of organisations working among them, throws more light on the complex nature of rural power relations. In the eyes of the people at large, oppressors are those who trample upon the dignity of their labourers by forcing them to work for low wages, denying them access to land and subjecting them to humiliating practices. Employers of labour who possess such ignominious characteristics are marked out from other employers and locally designated as *zamindars* or as *samant*. The identification of a person as a *zamindar/samant* is not linearly related to the size of landholding. In essence, this identity, subject to the capacity to hire labour, hinges on the possession of a particular aggressive mentality, which may be characterised as a feudal mentality (*samant vichar*), manifested in a callous, intimidatory attitude towards labour in general and the dignity of women in particular. This attitude, typified in the term *rangdari*, used by both activists and ordinary villagers, encompasses the habitual and arbitrary use of force and a social code informed by criminality. The basis of power in rural Bihar, evidently, needs to be interpreted in terms that go beyond the amount of land owned. No doubt this power subsumes the capacity to hire labourers; but this attribute is informed by a certain mentality — described variously as *samant vichar* and *rangdar*.

This point may be exemplified with reference to the village Bara, which witnessed an unprecedented carnage in which 36 bhumihars were killed in an attack spearheaded by the Maoist Communist Centre.

According to various bohemia residents interviewed by the team, practically all bohemia landholders of the locality owned and operated only as much land as could be cultivated through the use of a single sloughing unit each (a sloughing unit — *eke hall* includes the ownership of a plough and a pair of oxen). This implies a holding of approximately 4 acres. Even if the holding is somewhat larger than 4 acres (say 5 or 6 acres), it would not be considered economical to invest in a second sloughing unit. The shortfalls in ploughing requirements are met by hiring in ploughing units from elsewhere. Only two or three members of the bhumihar community were reported to possess enough land to be operated by two ploughing units: none of them had more than 10 acres. In spite of the relatively small holdings, the reliance on hired labour was considerable owing to the fact that manual work was traditionally proscribed for this upper caste. Though material compulsions have forced men to take to actual cultivation, women continue to abstain from working in the fields. The norm is to maintain a full-time ploughman and hire labourers for major farming operations such as transplanting paddy, weeding, and harvesting.

Clearly, attempts to understand why Bara became the focus of violent retaliatory action by landless labourers and dalits are doomed to failure if they try to characterise the target of the attack as landlords or rich peasants. The notoriety of Bara, therefore, lies in other reasons.

Bara was apparently a marked village because its residents were believed to have links with the leader of the private militia Savarna Liberation Front (SLF), Ramadhar Singh, and his close associates Nawal Singh and Hardwar Singh. According to a school teacher in a neighbouring village, though Bara was not known to be a venue for meetings organised by the SLF, a significant section of its bhumihaar residents attended such meetings elsewhere and were complicit in SLF activities, including the massacres at Sawanbigha and Men-Barsiwan. Further, the landowners of Bara were notorious for the oppressive manner in which they treated their labourers, and their feudal mentality. According to him, yadavs and kurmis in Patna, and the latter in particular in Jehanabad, displayed the same oppressive character as bhumihaars associated with the SLF in Gaya. The notion of oppressor is applied to those who share a certain world view (*samant vichar*) among members of a dominant caste, who may not necessarily have large landholdings but deploy their power against the labouring poor.

An aspect of rural power that remains unstated so far, is the connection between its wielders and the state, comprising the civil and police administration, politicians, and the judiciary. This linkage, elaborated later, is a decisive factor in upholding the power of the rural oppressors. The substance of oppression, therefore, also includes the access that those identified as *samant* have to the corridors of state power. In brief, those who are perceived as oppressors combine within themselves the capacity to exercise three kinds of power: firstly, *economic power*, derived from control over land and the capacity to hire labourers, but not necessarily as substantial landowners; secondly, *social power* based on the social standing derived from belonging to a dominant caste and the leverage it gives for forging links with, or simply influencing, those who share the same world-view both in the countryside and in the corridors of power; and thirdly, *coercive power*, derived from the capacity to intimidate the labouring poor who question the conditions of work by the use of brute force. Economic power, social power and coercive power reinforce one another and together explain the dominance of specific groups in the areas covered by this enquiry.

Resistance to such dominance would have to comprehend all dimensions, economic, social and coercive, of the conditions under which the poor are forced to live. With the entry of the Marxist-Leninist groups, those at the base of the rural hierarchy have come to the centre-stage of agrarian movements and have given expression to their demands.

Peasant Organisations and Struggles

At present the main organisations spearheading agrarian revolt are the Jan Suraksha Sangharsh Manch (JSSM) and Krantikari Kisan Sangathan (KKS), associated with the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC); the Mazdoor Kisan Mukti Manch (MKMM) and the Lok Sangram Morcha (LSM) affiliated to the CPI(M-L) Party Unity; and Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha and the Indian Peoples Front (IPF) which is affiliated with the CPI(M-L) Liberation. (The MKMM is the resurrected form of Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti (MKSS), which was banned following the Arwal carnage in 1986.) The eighties have seen a considerable expansion of their influence in rural Bihar. The activities of these organisations have spread to virtually the whole of the central plains and are still expanding in the plateau region. By organising those existing traditionally on the margins of rural society around the issues of access to land and the payment of fair wages, and asserting their right to a life of dignity, these groups have succeeded in contesting the basis of rural power and oppression.

The initial campaigns and actions of these organisations were directed at resisting crime and dacoity, the theft of cattle, pumpsets, and the looting of crops. Such routine looting has been integral to the everyday mechanisms of exploitative relations. The singular success of Marxist-Leninist groups in this regard is testified even by police officials who agree that the areas where Naxalites have a strong base are notable for the virtual absence of such crimes.

The main plank of the struggles launched by these groups is the seizing of surplus and *gairmazarua* lands. About 1,000 acres of diara land created by the shifting of the river bed of the Son is currently being claimed by landless dalits in the villages around Jalpura (Patria) under the leadership of the MKMM. The MCC has been responsible for the takeover of about 4,500 acres in Gaya alone. To take one instance, in Ahiyapur the land of a substantial *malik* Naresh Singh, owning over 800 acres, was acquired. He then began terrorising all the villagers. For an entire season the land was left fallow. Finally, after a year the impasse was resolved, and about 100 landless families of the neighbouring villages -yadavs, badhais, chamars, and dusadhs commenced cultivating this land.

The battle to gain access to common land illegally occupied by a few dominant landowners is a long and protracted one. In Parasona (Jehanabad), 22 acres of *fgairmaz-arua* land controlled by a single landowner from Shaguni was seized by the villagers under the leadership of the MKMM five years ago and paddy was sown. At the time of harvest the *malik's* henchmen attacked the village, fired at the villagers, and forcibly harvested the crop. Two persons were injured. The villagers boycotted the land for two years, at the end of which the land was sold to Sudhir Kumar, a yadav landowner from Lodhipur. The land has been given on *batai* to persons from a neighbouring

village. For the past three years a police picket has been posted near this land to enforce private property rights on common land!

In the fight over rights on forest land in south Gaya (the only portion in the three districts which still retains some of its forest cover), the villagers have rendered the forest guards redundant. The rules put into force under the banner of the MCC disallow the felling of trees for sale in the market so as to prevent depletion of the forest, and at the same time give people the right to collect fuelwood as well as minor forest produce. One day in a week is reserved for this collection, while the forest is spared for the rest of the week. This is probably the reason why the MCC is referred to as the "Jungle Party" all over this area.

The Law and its Keepers

The recently appointed district magistrates and police superintendents claim that all efforts to maintain law and order are doomed unless some basic structural changes are brought about in the countryside through the implementation of land reforms. For them, this includes the distribution of *gairmazarua* land to the landless and implementation of the land ceiling act. The *DMs* of both Jehanabad and Gaya claim to be in the process of doing so, though they point out that the path is a long and winding one especially because the judiciary is not on their side. The apathy of earlier administrations has made the task all the more difficult, after the Bara killings the administration has started giving pattas to landless labourers and dalits in a few villages. It is even arraigning to send police contingents to the villages to enforce these transfers. The administration obviously, has recognised that force is essential for any land redistribution effort.

But the fact remains, that the organisations of the rural poor have been forcibly redistributing land, for many years now. Given the scale of confiscation and redistribution, even the administration is compelled to admit its own complete failure in this regard. The D.M., Gaya, conceded that "we are giving rights to the people over the lands that they have already distributed". In some cases, though, the administration has changed the names of allottees thus generating more tension. Due to this the landless have opposed the distribution of pattas by the administration. They have also refused to pay the tax associated with such patta rights on the ground that the government at no stage enabled them to acquire control over the land!

Wages and relative shares in *bataidari* are the other important issues in the struggles of the oppressed. However, on this account, the administration had no plans whatsoever. Administrative officials confess that though the cultivators remuneration was protected by state legislations, they did not have any effective means of implementing them. On the other hand, the M-L organisations active among the rural poor in this area were in effect been enforcing these very laws. While the legally stipulated minimum wage in this area is Rs 16.50 or its equivalent in kind (3 kgs. of grain), the same is rarely paid to the poor. But these organizations were instrumental in raising wages from a low of one to two kuchha seers (approximately 650 gms. to 1.25 kgs.) to 2.5 kgs and a meal.

Thus, while the government which is under oath to implement the laws of the country has failed to do so, the Marxist-Leninist organisations, which have little faith in the system and its laws, are in reality fulfilling this responsibility.

While the administration had confessed to total failure and inability to enforce minimum wage legislation in the rural areas, Marxist-Leninist groups have, as a result of numerous strikes, increased wages to as much as 3.5 kg grain in some villages. In Parasona the struggle for better wages was carried on for a period of three years. Wages first increased from 1 kg grain to 1.5 kg. By the next cropping season the labourers managed to increase it by a further half kilogram. The following year they were forced up to 2.5 kg. Wages in this village are currently 3 kgs of grain. A successful strike in one village has ripple effects on neighbouring villages too.

The struggles are not only about the amount of grain that constitutes wages but also over the provision of food during the day, the quantity of sattu and over the issue of the panja. Traditionally the labourer at the time of harvest was allowed to pick up extra paddy while making the bundle that constitutes his share (one in every twelfth is the norm). This is called panja. In Jhitkoria, the struggle for higher wages has been won. When we visited the village the issue of contention was the size of panja. The impact of the M-L organisations in the region was brought home to us in the open debate carried out in front of the team between a farmer owning 6 acres of land and a dalit labourer. Each was trying to show the team members the amount he considered sufficient panja.

In some places landowners have shifted to *bataidari* after wages have been raised in the region. The struggle in these villages now centres around the respective shares. The *bataidars* demand that the landowner provides seed, fertilizer, and contribute half the cost of irrigation. Both get equal shares at harvest but the *bataidar* is entitled to *panja*. The attempt by landowners to pass on the cost of the malguzari tax is being resisted. In south Gaya, in MCC areas, the system of *bataidari* is not recognised. The *maliks* who used to lease out their land do not find any willing sharecroppers to till their land, which have since been lying fallow.

The restoration of the dignity of female agricultural labourers has featured as a major plank in the political agenda of the various organisations of the rural poor in the area. Strikes for better wages are organised during the sowing and transplanting of paddy, a crucial period, and the labourers' bargaining power is greatest at this point. These operations normally depend entirely on the labour of women, and the success of these strikes depends on the ability to mobilise the women in the village. In Akori some village women had been singing revolutionary songs while transplanting paddy, at which the mukhia's men started slapping them. That entire season his fields remained untouched, and finally he had to publicly seek forgiveness.

The participation in militant struggles against the oppression of the *maliks* has also resulted in some change in the exercise of domination within the

family and community. The campaign to stop the drinking of toddy thus finds in women militant propagandists. In Daulatpur we were told that all the village women refused to cook for a whole day to protest an incident of wife-beating.

While in former times the sexual humiliation of women labourers was submerged within the framework of everyday relations between them, their families, and their *maliks*, the habitual raping of dalit women as a form of exploitation has now become an explicit issue. It is being taken out of the closet so that the shared experience of such exploitation is a means of forging bonds beyond the boundaries of family, community, and village. The resistance is a political act that questions the arbitrary exercise of power by *maliks*. Even senior members of the district administration conceded that the left-wing organisations have done much to force elements among the *maliks* to end their sexual depredations. In Gaya, a senior official stated that the activities of the MCC had put a virtual end to the raping and molestation of dalit women by instilling in everyone the fear that the penalty for rape in its lexicon was death.

After a decade of active struggles in the area all three organisations are poised in a process of strengthening and consolidating their base. The MKMM, for example, in addition to struggles for fair wages and control over land, is now taking up demands directly related to the development of agriculture. Farmers with holdings of less than 5 acres constitute nearly half the rural population. With stagnant agricultural productivity such cultivators are hard pressed in eking out a subsistence. Those among them who feel compelled to depend mainly on hired labour due to caste proscriptions are adversely affected by the struggle for fair wages. The antagonism towards such struggles often take a casteist form. Campaigns related to agricultural development take up the demands of these sections. It also forms a platform to weld links that cut across caste boundaries, an immense problem facing all organisations in this region. Recently, the MKMM formed a struggle committee that took up the task of building a 9 km long dam across the Tenar in Arwal block. Community labour from the surrounding villages was mobilised for its construction.

The recent thrust of the IFF has been to wage the struggle for democratic rights through an entry into the domain of mainstream electoral politics. In 1989 their candidate won from the Ara constituency in Bhojpur. Mobilisation of the middle sections of the rural areas is a determining factor at the polls, given the numerical domination of these sections, especially since dalits and landless labourers have been traditionally kept out of the electoral process and have been marginalised by the actual functioning of the institutions of parliamentary democracy. Attempts by the IFF to assert their right to exercise franchise (by resisting booth capturing) marks a shift in the main focus and strategies of

mobilisation and also shaped the conflicting tendencies within the middle sections. Mass mobilisation programmes, rather than espousal of local village level struggles alone, have come to the forefront. This is evident from the fact that most of the massacres in the past two years in which IFF activists were killed were perpetrated against the background of electioneering (Tiskhora, Deo Saharia, and even in some senses, Karkat-bigha).

The MCC, which shot into the national headlines with the Dalelchak-Bhagaura killings of rajputs in Aurangabad, uses methods of organisation that are distinct from that of the IFF or the MKMM. Its activities have till recently been confined to underground mobilisation. The illegal methods of this organisation have been projected in particular by the media, to the extent of obscuring the fact that the struggles being carried out by it are over constitutionally guaranteed rights to land ownership, minimum wages, and a life of dignity. It has recently launched various mass organisations the Jan Suraksha Sangharsh Manch, and the Krantikari Bud-dhijeevi Sangathan. After its ban by the Government in 1986, subsequent to the Dalel-chak killings, this marks the first move to initiate open fronts and mass mobilisation.

Mobilisation under peasant organisations has brought about a sea change in the lives of those on the margins of society. Not only can "the Harijan no longer be taken for granted", to quote the district administration

Literacy: Whose Concern?

The D.M. Jehanabad recently initiated an alternative literacy programme in some dalit tolas belonging to the most oppressed dalit section, the musahars. The success of the programme was clear to the team when it visited the dalit tola of Aikil. The dalits told us that their children were humiliated earlier in the regular school and had thus stopped going there. Teaching anyway never took place at the school, and only those people sent their children to the school who could not afford to send them elsewhere.

The new school has been a success, and apart from children many adults, too, attend it. The tola residents had themselves constructed the shelter where the classes are held. Its location in the tola has given the residents a sense of self respect and power. The D.M., however, adds that the success of this programme is attributable to the MKMM, active in the area, which has been involved in the programme and is providing teachers for the school. Ironically, this very organisation whose help the government is seeking in its literacy programme, has been banned.

at Jehanabad, but further, even while dismissing the MCC as a gang of criminals, the administration at Gaya is forced to admit that they have managed "to put the fear of God" into the powerful lobbies of the rural elite.

The response of these lobbies and groups has been characteristically

brutal, taking the form of organised attacks by their private senas or militias.

Private Senas

The growth of private senas *of maliks* in response to the strengthening and expansion of peasant organisations is a phenomenon peculiar to Bihar. It is said that these senas emerged from the vestiges of the traditional lathaits (musclemen) who formed the coercive arm of feudal power in rural Bihar. Whatever their origins, the pervasive entrenchment of criminal gangs and dacoity leading to the routine looting of crops and cattle of the small farmers has been, and continues to be, part of the means of enforcing exploitative relations in this region. (In the eastern district of Bhagalpur, two years ago, these same sections were implicated in the perpetration of the worst riots the district has witnessed.) This phenomenon acquired new dimensions in the violence of the reaction to the movements among the labouring poor through the formation of private senas.

The private militias in these districts have existed for over a decade. Mobilisation for them is largely on the basis of caste, and draws from the middle rungs of rural society. The bhumihars were the first to organise in the form of the Brahmarsi sena in the early eighties. Kurmis are another caste group which is numerically strong in some areas of Jehanabad. In their quest for social power, upcoming *maliks* among them have attempted to violently crush the demands for better wages by agricultural labourers. This gave rise to the Bhoomi Sena in Patna and Jehanabad. Around the mid-eighties another private sena, this time an expression of the powerful yadavs the Lorik Sena was formed in the districts of Patna and Nalanda.

These private militias were responsible for the killing of a large number of poor peasants, labourers, and political activists. Their modus operandi was to take control of a village, kill any dalit connected with the peasant/worker organisation and destroy their houses. A section of the sena would then camp in the village. Food and shelter would have to be provided for them. Dalit women would be kidnapped and raped as a regular practice. Some of the most gruesome massacres in the eighties, such as at Pipra, were orchestrated by this sena.

The erosion of the support base among the middle and small farmers, who provided members of the private senas food and shelter, was a major factor leading to their disintegration. Their excessive demands, wayward behavior, and molestation of the womenfolk alienated them. The

unleashing of repression on their poorer caste brethren was thus responsible for this erosion. Moreover, the protracted battles with Marxist-Leninist groups played a decisive role in their dissolution.

The present Janata Dal regime has witnessed the resurgence of private senas and the politics of massacre in a new form. The Kisan Sangh, which established its 'reputation' with the Tiskhora carnage, brought together "backward" yadavs, and "forward" rajputs and bhumihars in the heyday of the anti-Mandal agitation. Operating in the Patna-Bhojpur belt, this sena is believed to have been formed after Pradeep Yadav, mukhia of Paliganj, a relative of Ram Lakhan Yadav, was killed by Naxalites. Rani Lakhan Yadav, incidentally, has the signal distinction of being at one point both a legislator from the Congress(I) and a Janata Dal M.P. He is the political patron of the Kisan Sangh.

This sena was launched by a procession of more than 500 persons marching to the Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav's house and demanding an end to Naxalite activities in the state. Their attempt to further this end resulted in the massacre of 14 landless labourers at Tiskhora (Patna), seven at Karkatbigha (Patna), and 14 persons in the villages of Dcochand and Saharia in Bhojpur. The cross-caste mobilisation of the Kisan Sangh had begun showing signs of strain by the 1991 elections. This was largely the effect of the politics of caste-based vote banks. The Karkatbigha massacre was believed to have been an attempt to win over the bhumihars of the region. They had voted against the Janata Dal candidate and Kisan Sangh leader, Ram Lakhan Yadav, in the July 1991 polls, primarily due to caste antagonisms. The Kisan Sangh has also attempted to take up economic demands such as better procurement prices and input subsidies. However, with the splintering of the sena's organisational structure these programmes have been abandoned.

Seeking inspiration from the Kisan Sangh, elements of the earlier Brahmarsahi sena reconstituted themselves under the banner of the Savarna Liberation Front (SLF). It was formally inaugurated on 21 December 1990 under the patronage of the notorious King Mahendra, a Congress(I) member of the Rajya Sabha. Two other Congress legislators, Jagdish Sharma and Ramashraya Singh, are also associated with this front. The other political figure associated with the organisation include the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) leader from Makhdumpur (in Jehanabad) Tilak Singh. The sena includes a large number of noted and hardened criminals, such as Bindu Singh and Krishna Sardar.

The commander-in-chief of the SLF is Ramadhar Singh, a bhumihar by caste. Popularly known as 'Diamond', he was a clerk in Kirani college in Gaya before he achieved notoriety. His position as the commander of SLF probably has much to do with his close personal connections with 'King' Mahendra. The latter has employed two sons of Diamond's in his pharmaceuticals firm in Bom-

bay. According to reports Diamond has vowed to wipe out Analcites from central Bihar and claims that: "*Mara ixias mastodon kid chital par likha jayega* (in history my name will be written on the funeral pyres of labourers).

This sena has a strong organisation. To become a member a farmer pays 2 kg. of grain and a karamchari one percent of his salary. Some of the literature of the SLF was seized at the time of Diamond's arrest. It claims to put forward the philosophy of the army. But, as the police officer responsible for the arrest told us wryly, "there is nothing philosophical about the literature!" It openly propagates the massacre of the dalits. The massacres at Sawanbigha, Rampurchai and Men & Bar-siwan are all attributable to the SLF.

The third major private sena in Bihar is the Sunlight sena that has been spreading terror in the district of Palamu. Avdhesh Kumar Singh, a Janata Dal leader, is one of its guiding forces. It was founded by Vijay Singh, the brother of Bhishm Narain Singh (Governor of Tamil Nadu). Inspired by the methods and patron? of this Sena, a militia of the same name was formed at the initiative of Subodh Singh, a substantial landowner of Pipra in south Gaya. The pathan and rajputs *maliks* of this region came together in a bid to curb the growing militancy of the sharecroppers and labourers under the MCC banner. Together these senas have been responsible for the most gruesome acts of violence against landless labourers and dalits.

These massacres perpetrated in the name of Wiping out naxalites, or in retaliation against struggles launched by them, have become endemic to the Bihar countryside.

Agrarian Tensions and Massacres

Karkatbigha, Paliganj P.S., Dist Patna

Karkatbigha village lies along the Son river in Paliganj block in the south-west corner of Patna district. Akuri, Masaurha, Udaypur, Mohammadpur, Mahabalipur, and Jalpura are other villages in the same area along the Son river. The IPF and the MKSS are organising the rural poor in these villages. The struggles initiated by these organisations are mainly concerned with the issues of better wages and distribution of *gair mazarua* land to the landless. The attempts of the powerful *maliks* to prevent the spread of these organisations has seen the formation of the Kisan Sangh.

A few *maliks* of this area control large stretches of land. For example Akuri village has three landlords each owning over 90 acres of land and another 10 households owning about 30 acres each. The struggles over land have started in this area during the

last five years. At least 7.5 acres of *gair mazarua* land was occupied by the organisations in Akuri.

The struggles for better wages started in late 1986. While the existing daily wage was only a kilo of paddy, the organisations demanded 2 kgs. A year later it was settled at 1.5 kgs. Till four years ago a harwaha got only one kilo of paddy per day, today the payment is one kilo of rice along with 12 kathas (0.375 acres) of land for self cultivation. The payment for harvesting is one portion in every 12 portions.

In 1986, the district administration sanctioned the building of a road. Jaiprasad, brother of Janardhan Prasad, a big landowner in Akuri, stalled the work since the road would pass through his fields. The protest against this by the villagers invited his wrath and many were beaten up by Jaiprasad and his henchmen. After the lodging of a complaint, work on the road commenced again, but this time Jaiprasad's henchmen killed a villager. The workers protested by refusing to work on his fields. Finally the road was laid.

On 15 August 1991 six persons were killed in Bahadurganj in clashes between Naxalites and police and the landlords. In protest against this murderous attack by the police and the landlords, IPF organised a rally on 24 September 1991 through the villages of Akuri, Mahabalipur, Udaypur and Karkatbigha. Around 30 people, including eight women, started from Akuri and reached the outskirts of Karkatbigha. More people joined the rally from the dalit tola of Karkatbigha and moved towards the main settlement.

A month earlier Ravinder Singh, a member of Kisan Sangh and a large landowner from Udaypur, had been killed by Naxalites. He was the nephew of Biri Singh, mukhia of village Masaurha and a prominent leader of the Kisan Sangh. While the IPF rally was doing its rounds in the villages, the landlords of the area were holding a meeting of Kisan Sangh in Karkatbigha to plan retaliation for the killing of Ravinder Singh. As the rally approached Karkatbigha, they were stopped from proceeding. After a heated exchange, when the rally began returning, firing upon them started. Two wayfarers were killed and three labourers from Akuri — Miyadi Mochi, Parikshan Mochi and Banjari Mochi—were injured. An armed group of Naxalites was camping near the village. Hearing gunshots, one of them came to investigate and was hit by a bullet and died on the spot. The injured tried to escape but were caught by the attackers and taken to Masaurha. Parikshan Mochi's brother, Butan, was also injured but he managed to run and hide in the fields. He waited there till there was nobody around and then started walking back to his village through a narrow path along the Son river. There he stumbled across a body near the river bank. He ran to the village Masaurha where the police had arrived and informed them. The policemen turned around and told him to produce the body. Some people from the village joined Butan and together they discovered two more bodies in the vicinity of a canal coming from the river. The bodies which bore marks of severe beating and torture were of the labourers abducted earlier.

After the incident 17 people were arrested. The families of the deceased were

promised Rs. 1 lakh as compensation. Till date they have received only Rs. 20,000. A police camp has been set up in the school building in the main settlement of Masaurha village ostensibly for the protection of the dalits! Not surprisingly, 12 dalit boys who had been attending this school have stopped going there now.

Sawanbigha, Shakurabad P.S., Dist. Jehanabad

To the west of the road joining Jehanabad with Makhdumpur and Gaya, across a small river, lie the villages of Sawanbigha, Narayanpur, Siraundha, Chainpura and Aikil. From Makhdumpur, jeeps and tongas make regular trips to a large village, Paibigha, which has a road passing through it lined with shops on both sides. On the other side of the village flows a small seasonal river, Dardha, which travels all the way from the hilly tracts of Hazaribagh and southern Gaya to empty itself in the Ganga.

From Paibigha if one crosses the river and travels north for a few kilometers along a broken down road (built as part of the anti-Naxalite programme of the Bihar government), one reaches Sawanbigha, where seven dalit labourers were killed by the SLF on 21 September 1991. It is reported to be a reaction to the incident of rifle-snatching at Badheta on 6 September, when their weapons had been seized by MKMM activists. The seven people killed at Sawanbigha had been kidnapped from four neighbouring villages — Narayanpur (3), Siraundha (2), Chainpura (1) and Aikil (1).

Aikil is situated towards the north of Sawanbigha. The village consists of a main settlement of around a hundred households and a satellite settlement (tola) towards the south. All except a few of the households are bhumihars by caste operating a total of nearly 700 acres of land. About half of them own less than 1.5 acres of land. The largest holding is around 30 acres, and the rest own between 12.5 to 15 acres. About 150 acres of *gair mazarua* land in the village is controlled by the larger landowners. The tola consists of 72 dalit houses, all of whom are manjhis (musahar).

The village has had a history of struggle on the issue of wages. IPF had started mobilising villagers around six years ago. The daily wage at that time stood at one seer (900 gms) of grain. In 1989 there was a strike of the labourers for better wages. The wage settled after the strike was 1.5 kgs of grain and 0.5 kg. of food or 2 kgs. of grain. The payment in harvesting work is one headload in every 12 headloads harvested.

Every dalit we met had worked on the fields of a particular landowner. As far as they could remember no member of the family had ever worked in any other person's fields. Violence is perpetrated on the dalits every time a landowner feels that his speech or behaviour has been disrespectful. When a worker does not come for work, for instance due to sickness, he is beaten and dragged to the fields. They have no other work to supplement their income. In the lean season they work at the houses of the landowners. For this they are only provided food.

In spite of a large amount of *gairmazarua* land, no land related struggles have been carried out in the village. In 1989 itself the dalits had gone to a pokhar in the village to catch

fish. There they were surrounded and mercilessly beaten by the local landlords. Since then no dalit has gone to the pokhar.

On 21 September, one dalit from the tola, Shivrat Manjhi, an IFF activist, was working in the fields. He was picked up and taken to Sawanbigha and killed. He had a family consisting of a young wife and three small children. There was no witness to his abduction. Thus the villagers have not named any persons responsible for the murder. The lack of any named accused could also be the result of the terror of the local *maliks*. While the daiits were talking to the team, one person from the main settlement came close by and a stifling silence followed.

After the incident, Rs. 1 lakh as compensation was promised to the next of kin along with a job. The dalits of the village were also promised pucca houses. Till date the family has only received a cheque of Rs. 50,000. There is no response regarding the job and pucca houses. A police camp has been set up in a school in the bhumihar settlement. According to the dalits, the posted police personnel are provided food from the *maliks'* houses. When the dalits are beaten or harassed by the landlords, policemen from the camp visit the tola and threateningly enquire about the happenings. This deters any attempts at registering complaints and no action is taken against the latter.

The other village visited by the team was the one which suffered the maximum number of deaths. Narayanpur village has 70 households in the main settlement of which around 60 are bhumihar and the rest are kurmi and badhai. The bhumihar families have an average land holding of 6 acres. The largest holding, of about 13 acres, belongs to Mithilesh Singh. The other families have smaller holdings of around 2 acres. The dalit tola on the east of the village consists wholly of ravidas (chamar) families except for one musahar household.

A tract of 3.52 acres of *gair mazarua (khas)* land in the village is controlled by of one landowner Lakhan Singh, who in addition owns about 9 acres of land. The MKSS staked its claim over the land by planting red flags around it. The *maliks* resisted this takeover, and since that time this has been a source of continuous tension. The administration has done nothing about it except asking the dalits to instead distribute some of the existing unencumbered *gairmazarua (aam)* lands among themselves.

On 21 September, an activist of the MKSS had come to the village. Some people had gone from the tola to leave him to the village outskirts. While returning they were surrounded by a group of men brandishing firearms, within visible distance from the tola. Many people of the tola were thus witness to the abduction of these three men. The residents of the tola got news the next morning that those abducted - Kael Das (40), Manohar Das (30) and Ram Vishun Das (35) had been killed at Sawanbigha.

After the incident, dalits from the tola were promised compensation of Rs. 1 lakh and jobs for the next of kin, building of pucca houses and old age pension for the residents of the tola. Of this the victims' families have received only Rs. 50,000 each. For building the houses the administration has dropped a few truckloads of bricks and asked the residents to build the houses themselves, but no land has been granted. Ironically the bricks have been dropped on

the *gairmazarua* land that is presently in dispute, without the dalits being given possession over the land. Thus, while the dalits are being prevented from entering the site, many bricks have been removed from there and the rest have been broken.

The residents, who were witnesses, have filed an FIR with the police naming at least nine people involved in the abduction including the commander of the SLF, RamadharSingh 'Diamond'. All of them had absconded to escape arrest, so the court passed orders for "attachment of movable property". All except two surrendered to the police. They have since obtained bail, including Ramadhar Singh and another person who had never even been arrested and thus did not appear before the court.

After the killing, dalits of this village have refused to work on the fields of the *maliks*. As a retaliation no *malik* in the nearby villages is willing to employ them. Regular threats from the *maliks* also prevents the dalits from leaving the village and going out in search of work.

A police camp has also been set up in a school building in the main settlement of Naray-anpur. This has not prevented the regular visits of armed henchmen of the SLF and their taking shelter in the village. In fact, the dalits claim that there had been intermittent firing towards the tola from the main settlement just a few days prior to the visit of the team. But violence is nothing new for the dalits of the tola. They have faced violence from dacoits in the past. They received regular threats during the strikes for better wages. On 25 June 1991, in connection with the movement for taking control of the 3.52 acres of *gairmazarua* land, *maliks* from the village had fired at the dalit tola in which five people were wounded. The administration had given a compensation of Rs. 4,500 to one person who had been permanently disabled. The rest were given Rs. 500 each. No steps were initiated by the administration to solve the issue of the disputed land or to check the commission of violence on the dalits.

Men & Barsiwan, Belaganj & Tekari P.S., Dist Gaya

Travelling along the Dardha river for a distance of 7 kilometres from Paibigha, one reaches Men village having at some point on the way crossed over the border into Gaya district. Just across the river, and in the jurisdiction of another police station lies Barsiwan. On the night of 23 December 1991 an armed mob of the SLF attacked three dalit tolas in the two villages. Ten people were murdered that night.

Men village comprises one dalit tola, while the main settlement is dominated by bhumihars, Barsiwan -has three dalit tolas while the main settlement comprises mostly yadav households. Another bhumihar village close to Barsiwan is Kespa, which is believed to be the main shelter of the SLF. Naresh Singh, a leading SLF member, resides in this village. The MCC and the MKSS are organising the poor in these villages to fight for their demands of legally stipulated minimum wages. The landless organised a strike in 1991 to demand a raise in their wages from the existing 1.5 kgs. to the stipulated 3 kgs. The strike carried on for three to four months at the end of which the *maliks* from Men came to the tola and beat up the workers. The same night an armed mob swooped on the tola, beat up the residents and set

fire to 14 houses. The next morning some of these same attackers, including Ramadhar Singh, came to the tola to negotiate a settlement. The wages were fixed at 2.5 kgs. While the labourers receive 2.5 kgs. as wage in Barsiwan they obtain only 1.5 kgs. in nearby Kespa.

Two dalits from Men, Ramswaroop Manjhi and Nandlal, lodged a complaint against the attackers for arson and setting fire to houses. Right through the agricultural season, these two were threatened and offered money to withdraw the case which was due to come up for hearing in January 1992. Though ten people were named as accused in the complaint, no proceedings had been initiated against them by the police.

In early December a public meeting had been organised by the MCC in Charhata, a nearby village. Late in the evening, in the course of a cultural performance, the meeting was sought to be disrupted by some of the bhumihar landowners residing in the vicinity. In the scuffle that ensued, one person attending the meeting was hurt, upon which firing started in which two bhumihars were killed.

On 22 December 1991, a mob armed with firearms gathered at Kespa which adjoins Barsiwan. Around 8 p.m. the mob surrounded the tolas of Barsiwan — Barsiwan Math and Parshurampur— and entered them while continuously firing, dragged four people out of their houses and killed them. Those killed were Parashuram Manjhi, Shivnath Mochi, Bhun Mochi and Prajapat Kedar. After the killing the same mob attacked the dalit tola of Men around midnight when all the residents were sleeping. The attackers broke into the houses, pulled out some people, took them a hundred metres away and killed them. Many fled from the village after hearing the gunshots. The mob searched for Nandlal, but he was not present in the tola. Six people were dead when the mob left the village. Among those killed was one of the witnesses of the earlier attack, Ramswaroop Manjhi. The others killed were Munni Manjhi, Bineshwar Manjhi, Janki Manjhi, Dina Manjhi, and Dukhan Mistry.

Following the attack, another case has been registered against eight accused persons, including the leader of the SLF, Ramadhar Singh. No one could be immediately arrested as they were absconding. The "attachment of property" orders too were of no avail since the accused had prior knowledge and removed all property that could be confiscated. Later two were arrested while the others have been let off.

Two police camps have been set up —30 policemen at the Men tola, and 80-90 in the main settlement in the building of a school run by the *maliks*. Compensation of Rs. 1 lakh to the family of the victims was announced, and promises of pucca houses, hand pumps, jobs, free rations for three months were given. But they had only received Rs. 20,000 till the time the team met them.

Bara, Tekari P.S., Dist. Gaya

A 5-kilometre walk from Barsiwan village, through fields, takes one to Bara. But the better known route to Bara is through Tekari, from where a road goes within a kilometre off the village. The village is a known shelter of the SLF commander Ramadhar

Singh and his right hand man Haridwar Singh. After the killings by the MCC, a pucca road is in the process of being laid. Close to Bara, along the road, are colonies of labourers that were all deserted at the time of the team's visit.

The main settlement of Bara has approximately 50 households. Of these around 45 are bhumihar, and the rest comprise brahmins and one family each of teli and dusadh. Of the bhumihars around 10 families are poor, owning less than an acre each. Most of the bhumihar families operate a single plough, but three households have four oxen and two ploughs each. Thus Bara is not a village of large landlords, the largest holdings at present measure around 10 acres. A canal ends in this village, which inundates some of the fields for a part of the year.

Though Bara has a small dalit tola, large dalit bastis close to it supply labour for farm work. The daily wages for farm work till a few years ago was around 2 kuchha seers (1.3 kg.) along with a *sattu* meal. After strikes by workers the wages have now risen to 2 kgs. and a *sattu* meal. The payment for harvesting is one headload in 16 headloads in the Tekari region. Higher wages and harvesting payment in the nearby Konch P.S. area is a source of continuing tension. *Bataidari* is common, which involves a 50 percent sharing of the grain and the cost of all inputs have to be borne by the *bataidar*. But according to the people we interviewed, "*Aarthik ladai peech ehai, samajik aage hai*" (The social struggle is primary, economic struggles come later). The team found the dalit tola completely abandoned due to fear of large scale arrests and reprisals.

Though partitions within families has led to a reduction in the size of landholdings, and Bara today does not have large individual holdings, the attitude of the upper castes towards the dalits has not changed. The coming of the SLF, and the patronage of the notorious Nawal Singh of Kespa, has strengthened the repressive practices of the *maliks* in Bara.

On the suspicion that the two SLF commanders were in Bara, on the night of 12 February 1992, at around 9 p.m., a large mob surrounded the village. The mob was estimated by the villagers to have a strength of around 2000, and by the district administration to be between 400 and 500. The mob entered the village amid sounds of gunshots and asked the villagers to hand over the two leaders. Those who refused were dragged out, and in one case dynamite was used to blast open a door. The mob, according to the families of the survivors, comprised workers from nearby settlements since they had been able to identify the victims and also knew the location of the houses. The mob raised slogans of "MCC zindabad" and others to the effect that they were taking revenge for the killings at Men and Barsiwan. The MCC has owned responsibility for the killings.

Many people were taken to an abandoned structure in the north-west corner of the settlement. There 50 people were selected and their hands were tied behind their backs, using clothing, wires, etc. They were then taken to the canal, around a hundred yards east of the settlement. Here some pleaded that they were not bhumihars and were let off. One person got himself free of the binds, ran and jumped into a pokhar (pond) and escaped. The throats of the rest were slit with sickles. The police came to the spot immediately after the killings and took the victims to the hospital. Five people survived. All those killed belonged to 16 families on

the east side of the village, though some houses on the other side were also attacked.

The victims' families told the team that their only demand was a CBI enquiry to ascertain those guilty, pointing out that "*hamare he kuchh log dushman ke sath hain*" (some people of our own caste are with the enemies). Within Bara there seems to have been some antagonisms among the bhumihars themselves. One section is closely associated with the SLF leader Nawal Singh. The victims seem to have been targetted from this section.

After the killings, the Rs. one lakh promised to the families of the victims as compensation was given. A police camp has been set up in the village in the house of one of the victims' families. An FIR has been filed by the Bara residents in which 33 of the accused have been named. In all 115 people have been picked up from nearby worker bastis. Of these 5-10 are named in the FIR.

In the aftermath of the killings workers have refused to harvest grain from the fields of some of the richer landowners of the village, which includes those belonging to the victims' families, despite promises of higher wages. This has become a source of tension within the village.

Tindiha, Dumaria P.S., Dist. Gaya

The south-west corner of Gaya district, adjoining the districts of Palamu, Hazaribag and Aurangabad, consists of hilly and partially forested tracts. The land here is rocky and devoid of any irrigation except for some traditional sources such as ahaars and pokhars. Agriculture here is wholly dependent on the monsoons, with only one crop in the year.

In the area around the villages of Tindiha and Narayanpur, a small number of families own and control substantial portions of the land. For example, one Nanhe Khan (Mukhia Maksood Ahmed Khan) has lands spread over at least nine villages, among which he is the main landlord of three villages.

While the landowners themselves operate not more than 4 acres, the rest is leased out on *batai*. Given the generally low productivity of the land, operating these lands on *batai* and parting with half the produce is not enough to support a family. In any case all the land in the control of these landowners never comes under cultivation, and a large part of it always remains unused. The condition of the labourers is no better. The daily wage is 2 kuchha seers (1.3 kg.) of paddy. This form of exploitation is based on the brute power of the landed as well as the indebtedness of the *mazdoors* and *bataidars*. The rate of interest is Rs. 10 per month per Rs. 100 of loan (approximately 214 percent per year!).

Apart from the land under agriculture, forests too form an important source of livelihood for the people, being sources of minor forest produce such as lac, katha, gum and mahua. The landowners control all the mahua in the region irrespective of the location of the mahua trees. Any collection of mahua flowers by the villagers in the entire region is considered a robbery and results in beating by the landlords. The other forest produce was in the control of forest guards, who would charge exorbitant bribes from the villagers in return

for allowing collection.

The landowners in the area are pathans and rajput by caste. The pathans regard themselves close to the rajputs in the hindu caste hierarchy. Some argue that the pathans are in fact rajputs who had converted to Islam.

It is in this background that the MCC has mobilised the peasants and workers in the area. The major issues hence revolve around the oppression of landlords, redistribution of land, implementation of minimum wages, and control over forest produce. Regarding wages, a strike call was given by the organisation. Most of the smaller landowners belonging to castes such as kurmi, yadav, and koeri agreed to pay the stipulated 3 kgs. of grain, but the landlords refused. The organisation has also called for an end to the practice of *batai*. Their policy entails reserving as much land for the landlord as he can operate, and redistributing the rest. This has met with stiff resistance, and the organisation has given a call to all the *bataidars* to refuse to cultivate on *batai*. While refusing to pay the stipulated minimum wages and finding a threat in the call to end *bataidari*, these landlords, already well armed, have started collecting more arms and organising a private militia—the Sunlight Sena.

The violent reaction of the peasant organisations started on the issue of rape. In December 1990, Shakeel Khan and Shammu Khan were involved in the rape of some women from a dalit tola and have been absconding since. The Naxalites forcibly harvested their crop and kidnapped their father, Mujabbil Khan. The sons, on their return, contacted other landlords and took out a 500 strong armed procession.

From January 1991 the MCC started a campaign among the *bataidars* urging them to refuse to cultivate land on *batai*. Since then, armed attacks by the landowners and their henchmen started targeting any person even remotely believed to be connected with the organisation.

The secretary of the cooperative bank of Ramdohar Panchayat in which Tindiha is included, Lakshman Yadav, was beaten in the crowded Narayanpur *bazaar* in the daytime, abducted, and brought to Chhote Khan's house. On 14 January 1991, the brother of Parmeshwar Sahu, a resident of Narayanpur, was carrying goods for sale from the market to Jhadwa Chadan where he runs a shop. On the way he was surrounded by Sunlight Sena members, who killed him simply because he belonged to Narayanpur village. In March, Ganesh Mahto s/o Tulsi Mahto was accosted by armed Sunlight Sena members, while returning home on a Luna, and kidnapped. He has not been heard of since. A few days later Devnandan, a doctor practising in the area was returning home on a motorcycle with another person. They were both stopped and killed by Sunlight Sena men. On the same day as the earlier incident, Kishori, a tailor, from village Nandai, was returning home after withdrawing money from a bank. He was stopped and killed. A month later there was a rumour that some people had fired on Chhote Khan. The police jamadar, Baijnath Prasad Gupta, along with the son of Chhote Khan and four other landlords came to Narayanpur village, picked up Lala Singh and his son Vijay, mercilessly beat them and took them away. Lala Singh used to vend eatables in the market. No action has been initiated against the policeman as yet. He is still posted in the same area. Nanhe Khan, along with other

landlords, namely, Zuifkar Khan, Rafat Khan, Safat Khan and Chhote Khan are accused in the murder of seven people in Tindiha village on 30 September 1991. The above account provides a glimpse of the violence unleashed by the Sunlight Sena. It is important to add the above information has been collected from just one village and the incidents presented relate to happenings in the proximity of this village.

Tindiha is a very small village, in fact smaller than one can imagine, comprising in all three koeri households. There is no large settlement nearby so it cannot even be called a tola. The three families were headed by three brothers, Sahdev Mahto (60), Janki Mahto (55) and Manki Mahto (50). The three jointly own 3.5 acres of land. They had settled here about a decade ago after selling their land at Imamganj. They cleared the forest and brought the land under the plough. As there was no irrigation available in the region, they constructed ahaars to water the fields.

The rest of the land in the near vicinity is owned by five pathan families, each owning over 500 acres. The extent of the ownership by the pathan families is difficult to ascertain, since the lands are distributed over many villages. The three families in Tindiha, apart from tilling their three acres, operated the lands of the khan landlords on *batai*. There is no shortage of land for cultivation: in fact each of the landlords forces the peasantry to cultivate more of their lands. Earlier this year, the peasant organisation had given a call that peasants should refuse to work land on *batai*. A strike by the *bataidars* was carrying on. It was in this context that the landlords who owned land in the vicinity of Tindiha went to the village in the morning of 30 September. They told the three brothers to cultivate their fields in the coming season, and upon the latter's refusal to do so threatened them. The same night a group of armed henchmen of the landlords came to the village and pulled the seven male members then present out of their houses. Apart from the three brothers, they included Upendra (21), Umesh (16), Arjun (15), and Satyendra (15). They were taken some distance away, their hands were tied behind their backs, and then killed. The killers then came back to the village and told the women that the males had been killed.

Early the next morning, the women reached Koiridihtola of Narayanpur village. People from the village informed the police and went in search of the bodies. Three bodies were found at an ahaar and four at a pokhar close to it. Though police were posted at the entrance to Chhote Khan's house, they did not assist in the search for the bodies. The D.M. and the chief minister visited the village and promised Rs. 1 lakh as compensation for the next of kin of the deceased and Rs. 50,000 for the marriage of the daughters as compensation. In addition, they were promised jobs, pucca houses and development of their villages. At the time of the team's visit, the families had only received Rs. 20,000 to the next of kin and Rs. 500 for every dead person for the purpose of cremation. The survivors have not returned to Tindiha and were getting shelter in Koiridih tola. Nanhe Khan, was later arrested while seven other accused surrendered to the police. Two of them have obtained bail.

The social base of the peasant/worker organisations on the one hand and of the private senas on the other are clear from the above accounts concerning villages that have

been the centres of major killings in the last one year. Given the landholding structure as well as the caste-based oppression in these districts, it is only logical that tensions between various interests arise. Further, it is hardly surprising that such unresolved tensions should result in acts of violence. The killings at Bara is an instance of mass scale retaliation by organisations representing the dalits and the poor. The background to the incident lies, undoubtedly, in the perennially oppressive behavior of the Bara landowners who have been widely denounced as *rangdars*, their close association with the SLF, and the apparent lack of will displayed by the state in apprehending the SLF members accused in the carnages at Sawanbiga, Rampurchai, Men and Barsiwan. While the wide social sanction this action appears to have among landless labourers and dalits in this region, where the rule of lawlessness and the politics of crime preserve the status quo, is undeniable, such killings cannot be condoned. The implications of a large scale massacre as an answer to the killing of dalits are disturbing, especially when such killings are directed by an organisation leading the struggles against an oppressive social order. Equally disturbing is the fact that it took an incident like the one at Bara to force the state to take steps to clamp down on the SLF and arrest Diamond on the one hand and start implementing schemes of land distribution on the other.

In a context such as that in Bihar, what is crucial for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law is the manner in which the state intervenes in the ongoing agrarian conflicts. Unfortunately, the fact that the state responds only when there is an overt crisis, as happened after Bara, would only reinforce and legitimise the tendency among sections of the oppressed to perceive such retaliatory killings as the means of fighting oppression.

The State and Struggles of the Poor

The position of those unleashing oppression in the countryside in Patna, Jehanabad and Gaya is based not only on their local dominance •- encapsulating a commanding position as employers of labour, a collective identity based on caste ties, and a feudal mentality but also on their access to state power. The oppressors of the labouring poor derive their status from a combination of three kinds of power: economic, social, and coercive. Of the three, the possession of social power is the most significant because it is not only a means of mobilising those who share the same world view in the countryside but of having access to the corridors of power. The ability of these sections to appropriate the domain of state power and deploy the machinery of the state for their own ends, further strengthens their oppression.

It may be argued that the presence of a unique cluster of structures associated with modern state power — police, legislatures, courts and civil bureaucracies — have eroded, in principle, the power of rural magnates in the domains in

which they originally held sway. From a situation in which there was a certain balance between the power of rural magnates and that of state agencies, there has developed, in consonance with the logic of the modern state, a certain *tension* between the former and the latter. However, the rural elites of contemporary India have found ways of maintaining their hold over the local population by establishing, through caste, kinship, and illegal gratification, networks of advantageous connections with politicians, local officials, and the police, in short with the apparatus of state power at the district and provincial levels. Thus the social power of the rural elite is no longer restricted to a village or its immediate neighbourhood. The demonstration of social power requires showing how those notorious for tyrannising over the rural poor continue to do so by appropriating, in a sense, the paraphernalia of the state. The use of coercive power is inextricably interwoven into this scheme of domination.

The partisan nature of state intervention is clear from the functioning of the mechanisms for preventing and responding to incidents of rural violence. Thus, in the process of providing compensation to the families of the victims of agrarian violence, the administration has not been fair or even appeared to be so. Though the announced compensation/ex gratia payment in all such cases has been Rs. 1 lakh, only Es. 20,000 (Rs 50,000 in Sawanbigha) has been paid to the households belonging to the poor. But in the case of Bara the entire amount has been disbursed, in addition to funds contributed by various political parties including the Congress and the BJP. Evidently, the low value placed on the lives of the poor is reflected even in their death.

As to the maintenance of law and order, while the district administration claimed to its credit the prevention of any retaliation by the SLF after the killings at Bara, they have no comments about their own record prior to the incident. There are a variety of mechanisms at its command, including the setting up of pickets in villages, the arrest of those involved in violence, the attachment of the property of absconders, control over the issue of gun licences, and registering cases under more stringent laws.

In Jehanabad the police has 13 police stations, seven outposts and 43 pickets; in Gaya there are 30 police stations and 64 pickets. Most of the pickets are in villages and many of them have been set up after major incidents. But the manner in which different sections view these pickets is far from uniform. Those who dominate look forward to getting a picket in their villages, and even pressurize the administration to the effect. For example, a picket had been set up for the protection of Mahendra Singh at Chattiana and Tilak Singh at Umta, both of whom are SLF members. When the administration decided to shift the pickets recently to nearby dalit tolas, Tilak Singh moved the courts, arguing that the administration was trying to get him killed. This was in addition to putting informal pressure on the local S.P. to restore the pickets to their original location. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the dalits feel that the pickets are only for the protection of the *samants*. In all

the villages visited by the team, the pickets had been set up in the houses of *maliks* or in schools in the village main settlement. In Aikil and Narayanpur, near Sawanbigha, the pickets were in a school. Attacks by the *maliks* continued in Narayanpur in spite of the pickets. In Men the pickets were set up in a school run by the SLF members accused in the killings. In Bara the picket was in a house belonging to a bhumihar. Close to Tindiha the picket had been set up at the entrance of Chhote Khan's house, a leader of the Sunlight Sena accused in the killings.

The administration in Jehanabad conceded that in a number of cases police camps are solely providing protection to *maliks*. But this is sought to be rationalised on the ground that it is not possible to set up the camps in the tolas of the labourers since the arms and ammunition are not safe there. Further, while avoiding any generalisation, members of the administration said that, "since the police likes comfort, they receive it at the houses of those who can provide it". Interestingly, the same source added that out of the four battalions of the Bihar Military Police, "two suffer from caste considerations".

The manner in which arrests are made after incidents of violence provides further evidence of bias. In Sawanbigha, after the killing of seven persons by SLF, three SLF supporters were arrested. After ten people were killed in Men and Barsiwanby the SLF, two *maliks* were arrested. However, after the killing of the brother of an SLF leader, Aditya Sharma, in Makhdumpur, 33 dalits were arrested; and after the killings at Bara, 116 persons from the rural poor were arrested.

Even if arrests take place on both sides of the rural battlefield, the difference in treatment of the respective sides is revealing. For instance, while Ramadhar Singh Diamond and Bindu Singh of the SLF were under arrest on charges of murder, one of them had the whole of Gaya jail dancing in attendance and was allowed to give interviews to journalists, and the other would be escorted by the police to his village as and when he pleased. On the other hand IFF activists Dwarika Thakur and Jairam died due to torture in police custody.

But not all those named as accused in the FIR are arrested. Where the accused abscond, the police moves the courts for orders on attachment of property. When a dalit accused in a case is absconding, tolas are plundered, houses broken down, household goods looted, and any person seen is thoroughly thrashed and, if male, arrested and detained sometimes for days in the thana where the beating continues. Instances of this abound in the villages of Parsona, Jhitkoria and Dharnai in Jehanabad. However the enforcement of law becomes really humane when a *malik* is absconding. The news about impending attachment orders is reached to the person concerned virtually as soon as the police moves the courts. The courts then ponder over such an important decision so that attachment

proceedings are delayed for days on end enabling the prior removal of most of the movable property, that is liable to attachment. The police then move into action, but since by that time there is no property to attach, they concede defeat and civilly depart from the village. This happened in Men village after the killings of dalits.

The handling of applications for bail by the judiciary is prone to be interpreted differently, depending on who the accused are. The poor who are arrested and brought to court, often after days of humiliating torture, are perceived as dangerous criminals and sent to jail, and are refused bail every time their families are able to collect enough money to move the courts. But *maliks* are normally granted bail on the very first hearing. This is aptly illustrated in the case of the most wanted person in the SLF, Ramadhar Singh "Diamond", who obtained bail in 18 cases of murder even without appearing in court! Those among the labouring poor who are fortunate enough to obtain bail remain condemned to days of harrowing experience. They regularly lose their meagre daily earnings to appear for hearings at distant courts.

Since the last months of 1991, and more so during this year, cases of agrarian violence have been brought under the ambit of the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA). TADA cases are soaring at a tremendous pace, but those implicated in them are overwhelmingly from the labouring poor. Of the 58 arrested in Jehanabad under TADA, only two are *maliks*; in Gaya, out of 118 arrested, again only two are *maliks*. Thus TADA serves to make bail more difficult for those who are anyway denied such rights.

Apart from these methods, which all hinge on the fact that an act of violence has already taken place, the administration has at its disposal other direct methods of preventing violence. These include the control over private gun licences. Concerning this, the administration has apparently drawn a blank: it has no account of the number of licences issued, especially since licences may be obtained from any place in the country. Thus the arms of the private *senas* are secure with them. On the other hand, since the poor cannot afford firearms, it is taken for granted that any firearms in their possession must necessarily be illegal. This calls for raids on dalit *tolas* to confiscate arms and apprehend those who possess them on the ground that they practice violence. But members of the private *senas* cannot possibly be checked in this fashion — after all a private *sena* proceeding to attack a dalit *tola* actually comprises a group of people legally carrying arms!

The political patronage received by the various militias imparts to them the necessary leverage to obtain support from the administration. The kind of support extended to these elements by the executive lays bare, in a sense, their social power, for the oppression of the labouring poor is not

possible unless the police, in particular, consciously act in favour of the *senas*.

In Narayanpur, Gaya, where a carnage perpetrated by the Sunlight Sena had taken place, a group of bhuiya and yadav small farmers told the team that the police are quite brazen about their links with *sena* members, for they are often seen together. One of them said: "*police ko paise ke balpar control kar liya*" (the *sena*, through money power, has established control over the police). He added that the police are indifferent to the interests of "*chhote kisan*" (small peasants).

But the most telling comment on the role of the police in reinforcing the social power of oppressors emanated from the apex of the police administration — the Director General Police, Bihar:

There was a tendency among the police functionaries to encourage the defence groups (the *senas*) to organise themselves in order to fight out the Naxalites ... this was the very negation of police performance which actually resulted in the rise of different caste *senas* in Bihar. (*Extremists & Sena Activities in Bihar*: Policy document submitted in 1986.)

The nature of the expectations that the members of private militias have from the administration were conveyed during the team's very first interview with a senior police official in Jehanabad. He stated that the members of the SLF expect a captive administration, which performs in accordance with their interests. Thus, if one of them is killed by an M-L organisation "they expect over 100 arrests". However, even if a number of M-L sympathisers among the rural poor are killed by a private militia, and arrests of those allegedly responsible follow, the entire network of connections with elements of state power are mobilised to obstruct the operation of the rule of law. Not only is the state machinery being appropriated, with the state acting as a collaborator in the process of repression, but it is increasingly becoming pivotal to the everyday mechanisms of oppression.

This perception of the police was also conveyed in the conversations the team had with agricultural labourers in Jhitkauria, who have been victims of severe police harassment following the murder of a landowner in the neighbouring village of Mananpur. They believe that they have been implicated in the crime by their employers because the latter have been forced to concede higher wages. Since the Mananpur incident, visits by the police to Jhitkauria have become a regular phenomenon. In fact to speak of police 'visits' is a euphemism, for the labourers' accounts suggest that the police act like marauders, looting their meagre possessions, destroying huts, breaking all their pots, and beating the womenfolk while the men flee to avoid arrest. One of the most cruel practices of the police is to mix all the grains, spices, mustard and pulses that the villagers store in their houses. An entire season's stores are thus rendered useless. The police, therefore, act as instruments of the rural

oppressors, providing them another weapon to smash the resistance of the labouring poor. In fact, the labourers interviewed declared that in spite of their struggles "*daman karoop badlahai, daman ham na/un hua*" (repression has taken a new form, but repression has not been reduced).

A step further is the staging of false encounters, a practice that is as old as the history of revolutionary movements in India, but a recent phenomenon in Bihar. By staging false encounters to eliminate political activists among the poor, the police are reinforcing the coercive power of the senas. An area commander of MCC, Akela, was picked up from a village near Atri in Gaya by the police. A day later his body was found in Ghalaughati. He was supposedly killed in an encounter. In Chainpur, Bhabhua, four MKSS activists were killed, and more recently six MCC supporters have been killed in Badka gaon in Hazaribagh. After the team returned from Bihar, two villagers suspected of being MKSS activists were killed by the police in Shakarganj on 18 May 1992.

Perhaps the most perverse manifestations of social power are the links between groups guilty of oppressing the poor, organised in the form of various private militias, and members of legislatures at the national and state levels, especially those belonging to ruling parties, as shown earlier. The perversity of the linkage lies in the fact that elected leaders are under oath to uphold the constitution, including among other things, the fundamental right to life and liberty, whereas the private militias patronised by some of these leaders have appropriated to themselves the power of life and death in the areas of their operation. Their aggressive role in capturing booths and monitoring the exercise of franchise through coercive power is well known. A new feature of the senas, perhaps reflecting the changing configurations of power within the elite, is the rising political ambitions of their leaders. From being patronised and deployed at election time by political parties, the sena chiefs now aspire to enter the fray themselves. Thus, Ramadhar Singh, while in Gaya jail, has declared his desire to contest elections from the Makhdumpur constituency. The entry of such hardened criminals into the electoral fray has given the institutions of representative democracy a new meaning!

The peculiarities of the democratic process in an inherently unequal society have succeeded in further marginalising an entire chunk of the rural population who have been at the receiving end. The dalits in Tindiha did not even know of the last elections. The residents of Koeridih said that the polling booths had been set up at the house of Chhote Khan, a Sunlight Sena member, effectively precluding their participation. In Men, dalits have never seen a ballot paper. In Bara, two polling booths were set up in the upper caste settlement. No dalit or backward caste person was allowed to vote. In Narayanpur (Jehanabad) dalits were detained by the police ostensibly to prevent booth capturing!

The electoral process thus sends representative of the rural elite or those representing their interests to the assembly and the parliament. While the exercise of their power in the village has led to many a carnage, their representation in legislatures allows them to elude the consequences of such massive crimes with impunity. The legitimacy enjoyed by the politics of crime is unquestioned in a state where legislators themselves are caught in bloody feuding — as the killing of Hemant Sahi (himself an accused) in Vaishali or the battle between Pappu Yadav and Anand Mohan demonstrates.

To the extent that the agents of oppression are not subject to the rule of law, and practice the arbitrary use of power, their social code is informed by criminality. In so far as these oppressors are capable of bending the power of the state to serve their interests, not only have they succeeded in appropriating elements of state power, but have made the state complicit in their criminality. Within this framework it seems only logical for the state to pay only lip service to its own directive principles and subvert the establishment of a social order in which there is justice -social, economic and political. Therefore, in the contemporary rural scene in Patna, Jehanabad and Gaya the labouring poor are pitted against not merely a criminalised class of oppressors but a criminalised state, both of whom share a world view that is fundamentally opposed to the establishment of a just social order.

List of Killings: 1991-92

Date	Place	No. killed	Attackers
1.1.91	Kesri (Rohtas)		Criminal gang
7.1.91	Kesri (Rohtas)	11	Criminal gang
3.2.91	11Paharpur (Vaishali)	7	Police (firing)
19.2.91	Vishnupur (Begusarai)	7	Kisan Sangh
11.4.91	Tiskhora (Patna)	14	Criminal gang
30.5.91	Dariapur (Gaya)	3	Police (firing)
4.6.91	Harpur-Saidpur (Samastipur)	4	Sunlight Sena
22.6.91	Malbaria (Palamu)	9	Kisan Sangh
12.7.91	Deochand, Sahiara (Bhojpur)	14	Criminal gang (land dispute)
21.7.91	Sangrampur (Saran)	4	Police (firing)
23.7.91	Beria (Patna)	2	Police (firing)
26.7.91	Benipatti (Madhubani)	3	Colliery mafia
19.8.91	Religaria (Hazaribag)	9	Police (firing)
15.9.91	Benibagh (Muzaffarpur)	3	Police (firing)
21.9.91	Pethia (Kishanganj)	3	Sawarna Liberation Front
23.9.91	Sawanbiga (Jehanabad)	7	Kisan Sangh
25.9.91	Karkatbiga (Patna)	4	Criminal gang
2.10.91	Godarama (Saharsa)	5	Sunlight Sena
22.12.91	Tindiha (Gaya)	7	Sawarna Liberation Front
23.12.91	Rampur Chai (Jehanabad)	2	Sawarna Liberation Front
8.1.91	Men, Barsiwan (Gaya)	10	Criminal gang
8.2.91	Jhargada (Palamu)	4	Police (encounter)
12.2.91	Chainpur (Bhabhua)	4	MCC
20.3.91	Bara (Gaya)	36	Criminal gang
8.4.92	Brahmini (Palamu)	3	Party Unity
16.5.92	Kita (Palamu)	8	Police (encounter)
1.6.92	Shakkarganj (Jehanabad)	2	Police (encounter)

Killed by police: 34

Killed by private militias: 113

Killed by peasant movement: 44

This list is based on newspaper reports, and does not claim to be comprehensive

Land, People and PUDR

People's struggles centred around land question have always been part of our social history. Although they continue to be significant in rural India, they are not getting the attention they used to till the late seventies. PUDR has always been engaged in bringing to the focus such struggles right from its early days. Repression on peasant movement in Sirsilla and Jagityal in Andhra Pradesh (1978), tribal struggle in Singhbhum in Bihar (1979), police firing on tribals in Indravelli, Andhra Pradesh (1981), agrarian unrest in Patna (1981), a critique of the forest policy that adversely affects thousands of tribals (1982), repression in Jehanabad, Bihar (1983), political killings in Bihar (1983), repression on forest dwellers in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra (1984), massacre at Kaithibigha in Bihar (1985), encounter killing in Bastar, Madhya Pradesh (1985), social origins of rural killings in central and south Bihar (1986), repression in agency areas of Godavari, Andhra Pradesh (1987), terror in Jehanabad, Bihar (1989), struggle of people against gentleman farmers in Terai, Uttar Pradesh (1989), ecological roots of social conflict over land in Palamu, Bihar (1990), adivasi struggles in south Rajasthan (1991), people's struggles in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh (1992) are some of the investigations conducted by PUDR in the last fifteen years. In recent times, the land question is also getting reflected in the struggles of people being displaced by mega projects. PUDR has taken up such issues in the Gandhamardhan mining project and National Missile Test Range both in Orissa (1986 and 1988). Land struggles in contemporary India are both diversified and, also becoming more militant.

Despite the continuing significance of the land question and people's struggles centred around it, land has almost disappeared from the language of our ruling elite. Land reforms, structural changes in rural society are no longer part of the rhetoric of our rulers. Nowadays, no one makes promises, not even false ones, about land distribution. This denial by the powers that be, of the very existence of the land question, unfortunately, is also getting reflected in the media, academia and other concerned sections. And this environment is facilitating ruthless suppression of such struggles. Hence the significance of reports like this one. We believe that organised ignorance about repression is part of the schema of, repression.

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