

AND QUIET FLOWS THE GANGA

A Documentary report on the political killings in rural Bihar



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Introduction

For many outsiders Bihar evokes images of crime, corruption, and caste wars. Sensationalized reports of caste conflicts, the periodical exposure of scandals in high places and regular news of criminal gang operations from Bihar greet newspaper readers with unflinching regularity. But behind these 'popular' perceptions lie the bitter struggles of ordinary people which are unnoticed, unreported, and uncared for.

Bihar is India's second largest state with its population of about 70 million spread over 35 districts. It is divided into three natural regions: the North Bihar plains located north of the river Ganga; the South Bihar plains lying south of the river; and the Chotanagpur plateau. The plains are primarily dependent on agriculture mainly producing foodgrains. The Chotanagpur plateau on the other hand has considerable forest wealth and is the cradle of India's industrialisation, supplying coal, power, and steel among other things.

Contemporary Bihar is a web of social contradictions. The major contradictions that afflict the social reality of Bihar are between the landed elites and the landless; the upper castes and the lower castes; the workers on the one hand and the industrialists and the trade union mafia on the other; between tribals and foresters; and finally between the tribals and the non-tribal outsiders. Successive ministries in the state have only fostered these contradictions and have compounded the miseries of the oppressed by their acts of omission and commission. Thousands of undertrial prisoners languishing for decades in jails, the unrestrained gang warfare of the mafia in the coal mining region, the blindings in Bhagalpur, the infamous Press Bill and the massacre of oppressed sections are some of the events that have marked the actions of the Bihar state government in recent times. A bureaucracy that no longer pretends to be neutral and legislators accused in murder cases are adding new dimensions to the situation in Bihar. This is the context in which the social contradictions in the state have now reached a stage of explosion.

In the North and South Bihar plains the social contradictions are located in the agrarian structure. The inequitable distribution

of land and more specifically the low wages are at the root of these tensions. One hundred and sixty three killings listed here are due to agrarian tensions. In the Chotanagpur plateau the inter-related problems of land, forests, and development projects are at the source of the social contradictions. Sixteen of the killings listed here are related to these problems. In addition there are general agitations of a restive population for the implementation of welfare schemes, better employment opportunities and so on and these have now become common for all regions. A total of six killings listed below are related to such agitations.

In response to the situation a number of rural organisations have sprung up in Bihar in recent times. Organisations of agricultural labourers and small peasants in the plains and tribal organisations in the plateau region are now common to more than half of Bihar. Some of these organisations are associated with political parties and groups like the CPI (M-L) and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, while others are autonomous groups that are not necessarily associated with any known political organisation. Lack of sufficient authentic information has made it difficult for us to give a clear picture of these organisations or their area of operations.

The immediate response of the landed interests to the growth of organisations of the rural poor, is to build parallel organisations such as the Bhumisena (Patna and Gaya), Bhumi Bramarshi Sena (Gaya), Kshetriya Kisan Manch (Nalanda), Pragatisheel Kisan Sangh (Bhojpur) and so on. These organisations are essentially private armies and may be held responsible for as many as 108 of the killings listed below. Their unrestrained functioning also indicates the role of the Bihar police in the conflict. In fact, in some places they have conducted combined operations in order to eliminate peasant activists. Five such killings are listed below. In contrast in Chotanagpur, it is essentially the police who are responsible for political killings. All the 16 Adivasis killed in this region have been killed by the police. In the case of landlords, the killings are sometimes through armed mob attacks on the Dalit *bastis*, setting fire to the ¹⁷ houses and then shooting down the fleeing victims. About 10 such incidents in which 54 people were killed are listed below. In some other cases selected individual activists have been identified and eliminated. Nineteen such killings are listed below. Police action takes the shape either of indiscriminate firing, killing 42 of the people listed below, or the staging of so called 'encounters' where activists are killed in cold blood. Subsequently the story of

an 'encounter' with 'dacoits' is put out as an explanation of the deaths. Eighteen such 'encounter' killings are recorded below. Any attempt to record the political killings in rural Bihar is beset with serious difficulties. The fact that the state government treats all social and political unrest merely as a law and order problem obscures the picture further. The generally high rate of crime in the state helps this camouflage and in many cases activists are described as 'dacoits'. In certain areas some kind of Robinhood figures have emerged as defenders of the poor people's interests. They can neither be described as 'dacoits' nor as political activists. The caste factor also adds to the confusion. Even clear cases of organised labourers getting killed by their landlords are described merely as 'atrocities on Harijans'. Unfortunately even the media helps this process by its distorted reporting. These are some of the limitations underlying the listing of the incidents in this report.

In general the choice of incidents has been determined by the involvement of a political organisation or its affiliate. In a few cases we have also taken into account other factors like spontaneous efforts at organisation, and the nature of the conflict between the groups involved. Our report is however likely to be a gross underestimate of the actual number of killings. Statements issued by the Bihar government indicate that parts of 20 districts are affected by serious social tensions. But we have reliable information pertaining to only 17 districts and among them three districts alone account for 134 killings while 5 districts have only one each. Our information is particularly weak in the case of the outlying North-western Bihar districts.

Lack of information about repression is part of the scheme of repression itself and it is to overcome the existing ignorance that we have prepared this report. Presented below is a grim catalogue of death in a series of 48 incidents in which 185 people have been killed over a period of 182 weeks from January, 1980, to June, 1983. The People's Union For Democratic Rights hopes that this report will help a larger number of people to become aware of the sordid tale of the uninterrupted political killings in rural Bihar.

"You can not cross examine the dead."

—E.H. Carr

II Chronology of Death

1980

Paras Bigha on the night of 6, February, armed landlords raided the village Paras Bigha, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. The attackers set fire to almost all the Harijan house in the village. They first bolted the doors from outside and then poured kerosene over the reed and thatch huts and set fire to them. People who were fleeing the houses were shot dead. Altogether twelve people were killed in the attack including four women and five boys.

(EPW, 23, Feb.)

Pipra On the night of 25, February, about a thousand musclemen of Kurmi landlords, headed by all the bigwigs of the area, armed with guns and rifles raided the village Pipra, Punpun block, Patna district. They surrounded the 27 houses of the Harijan community. Bhutali Ramdas, ~~and then~~ the 65 year old leader of the community was dragged out of his house, his head chopped off and the body was thrown into the fire. Altogether 14 people were killed in this attack including seven women and five children.

(Frontier, 29, March)

Marmadiri Landlords of the village Marmadiri, Hazaribagh district killed a Dalit agricultural labourer on 16, March. (RCSCST)

Deorla Kothi In April, 1980, Bishenpur Sarnia, a local landlord of the village Deoria Kothi, Paru block, Muzafarpur district, was released on bail after six months of imprisonment. He was sent to jail as an accused in the murder of a peasant leader. He came back to the village to take revenge on the followers of the local peasant organisation. He and his men killed two activists, Raghubans Ray and Bainath Ray. Bainath Ray was the sarpanch of the village. (Frontier, 7, Sep.)

Kerserwa On 29, June, a large army of landlords, their musclemen and police, numbering about 500, surrounded the village Kerserwa, Rohtas district. They seized the village for over eighteen hours in search of an alleged dacoit Mohan Bhind. Unable to find him, they picked up four young Dalits, tied them up and rode horses over their chests and killed them. (TOI, 18, July, EPW, 9, Aug.)

Gua On 8, September, a group of adivasis assembled at Gua, a small mining town in Singhbhum district. They had gathered for a

demonstration which was to end up presenting a memorandum to the local police and forest officials. The Bihar Military Police opened fire on this peaceful gathering and three adivasis were killed on the spot and a number of others injured. The injured were taken to the nearby TISCO hospital. As soon as the first batch of nine adivasis were brought to the hospital, they were surrounded by the armed police who opened fire once again. This time 9 people were killed. (EPW, 20, Sep. RCSCST, pp. 308-318)

Shankarpur Dispute over the settlement of government land led to an attack on the Harijan *basti* of the village Shankarpur, Araria sub-division, Purnea district. On 8, November, their houses were set on fire in which an 8 year old girl was burnt to death. (RCSCST, pp. 149)

Baipi On 24, November, armed police raided the village Baipi, Chakradharpur block, Singhbhum district, in search of an *adivasi* activist, Suniya Jojo. Unable to find him, the police misbehaved with his wife against which the gathered villagers protested. In a fit of anger police opened fire as a result of which an *adivasi*, Tikud Laguri, was killed. (SE, Dec.)

Telaiya In early December a group of armed men posing as pilgrims to VaidyaNath Dham, came to Telaiya village, Kotariya block, Bhagalpur district and attacked some houses of the village, allegedly in retaliation against a robbery. Seven people, said to be associated with a local political organisation were killed. (IE, 6, Dec.)

Bairiganj In late December, Dhanraj, a blind man, was shot dead by armed men of Bhumisena, in Bairiganj, Punpun block, Patna district. He was going to Malikpur to arbitrate in an agrarian dispute. Dhanraj was well known in his locality as a poet (Janamat, May, 1981).

1981

Birampur Since the mid-seventies, an agitation was going on in the village Birampur, Arrah block, Bhojpur district, against the local Zamindar, on various issues. Sometime back the villagers took possession of some *Gair Mazurua* land and set up their huts there. The Zamindar and his men since then have been harassing them in many ways and they filed a case against the Harijans. But the Harijans won the case. Soon after on 26, June an armed party of the Zamindar and his men attacked the Harijan Basti and set fire to four huts. They were joined by the armed police from the local camp. One person, Shyama Dayal, was killed. (Janamat, July).

Siswa On 26, August, a 14 year old Harijan boy, Gujjan Ram, was beaten to death by the police at Siswa village, in East Champaran district. (TOI, 27.Aug.)

Maithila On 17, September, three local peasant activists were arrested by the police who claimed that they were 'Naxalites' and were carrying 'inflamatory material'. They were initially beaten with lathis and were later shot dead, in the village Maithila, Maror block, Bhojpur district. (Janamat, Dec.)

Patna The growing conflict between the landlords and the poor and landless peasants led by the Kisan Sabha became intensified in different blocks of Patna district in late October. On 30, October, senior police officials of the area led over a hundred men of Bihar the Military Police in massive raids throughout the affected blocks. In a span of a week from then the armed policemen shot and killed Surinder Mehta and Chandravati of Narihi-Pirihi villages in Bikrampur block, Devinder Ram of Kajra village, Devaki Manjhi and Janaki Manjhi of Bahuara village—both from Naubatpur block, Debendra Ravidas of Beshwarpur village in Masauri block and Laxman Chowdary of Parh Bigha village in Dhanrua block. In all seven people were killed including a 15 year old newly married girl. (PUDR, 1981)

Barsoi On 19, November, police opened fire on a demonstration outside the Barsoi police station, Katihar district. Four 'naxalites' were killed. (TOI, 24, Nov.)

Sarjomhatu On 25, November, a police party led by the DSP went to Sarjomhatu village, Sonua block, Singhbhum district, to arrest some tribals involved in a case of forest felling. They destroyed the houses of the wanted villagers. When the villagers protested, they opened fire, killing Tapa Hembrom, a 19 year old tribal. (SE, Dec.)

1982

Majhauili The village Majhauili, Gaya district, was attacked by the landlords on 18, March. The attackers set fire to the house of an activist of the peasant movement, Bigay Chaudary, who was burnt to death. Chaudary was a blind man. (PI, June, 83)

Mahadipur On 20, March, in the village Mahadipur, Patna district, Dahuram, a Kisan Sabha activist was killed by the landlords in the early morning hours while he was going to his *masoor* fields. (PI, June, 83)

Baluaha Conflict between peasants and landlords has been brewing in and around Baluaha village, Rajnagar block, Madhubani district, since early 1982, when more than twenty share croppers filed a claimant suit in the court. On 2, April an altercation took place between Chanaiya Mandal a share cropper and the landlord. Sukhdev Thakur, a carpenter of the village, intervened on behalf of Mandal. Police who were present all throughout the incident intervened at that stage and beat him up severely. He was dragged to a landlord's house and was forced to drink urine as a result of which his condition deteriorated and he was taken to Madhubani hospital

where he died. Next day, on 3, April, about 500 villagers demonstrated at the landlord's house in protest. Police opened fire on the gathering, killing six people (unofficial estimates eight) on the spot.

(EPW, 19, June)

✓ **Chaibasa** Adivasis of Chaibasa, Singhbhum district, have been agitating against the construction of Kujua Dam, which will submerge their villages. The dam is part of the multi purpose Subernarekha Valley project. They have been agitating under the leadership of Kadkai Ban Sangarsh Samiti. In the early hours of 4, April, a police party, led by local DSP raided Illigara village and took away Gangaram Kalundia. Gangaram, 40, a retired Naib Subedar of Indian Army, was tortured to death. He was the general secretary of Kadkai Ban Sangarsh Samiti. (Frontier, 24, July)

Bira On 25, April, armed landlords attacked the village Bira, Ghosi block, Gaya district. The village was one of the strong holds of the local peasant organisation. They entered at the dead of the night and began setting fire to the houses in the *tola* of Musahars. As the villagers woke up and began to run in panic, the landlords fired at them. Three old women—Bhatani Devi (80), Mahagi Devi (80) and Bhagiya Devi (60)—one young boy, Ram Bhajan Manjhi (15) and a young girl, Pipariya (12) were killed. (PI, June, '83)

Deoramath On 1, May, three alleged Naxalites, including a woman, were killed in an 'encounter' with the police in Deoramath village, Ghosi block, Gaya district. (TOI, 3, May.)

Mohammadpur On 4, May a group of landlords killed an alleged Naxalite at Mohammadpur village, Punpun block, Patna district. (Statesman, 7, May)

Chhapang Bigha Bhumisena landlords attacked the village Chhapang Bigha, Masauri block, Patna district. All the Harijan families left the village. Ganesh Mistry a young activist who refused to leave in defiance, was killed, (SO, June, 83, IE, 14, June, 83)

Bara In the village Bara, Masauri block, Patna district, a young Kisan Sabha follower, Sudeshan, was killed by five landowners. (SO, June, 83)

Kakoji A three hundred strong armed police force entered Kakoji village. Gaya district and raided the houses of Harijans. Three peasant activists were captured and shot dead. (PI, June 83)

Gaini A militant movement of landless labourers resulted in intense conflict between the landlords and the landless labourers in parts of Aurangabad district in early 1982. On 27, June a mob led by landlords attacked the Dalit *basti* in Gaini village. Seven people were killed. (Ravivar, 24, July, EPW, 14, August)

Jamuk In Jamuk, Jehanabad block, Gaya district, a procession of landless labourers, led by the Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti, was attacked by armed landlords in presence of the police on

2, July. Two Dalit agricultural labourers Siddeshwar Mochi and Sheo Pujan Paswan were killed on the spot. (PUDR, 1983A)

Kadirchak On 3, July, Gyanchand Bhagat, a small peasant was killed by the landlords in Kadirchak village, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. Bhagat was an activist of Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti. (PUDR, 1983A)

Bhagwanpur A gang of landowners, armed with rifles and guns attacked the village Bhagwanpur, Jehanabad block, Gaya district, on 10, August. They kidnapped three activists of Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti. Later all the three of them—Lakshan Manjhi (20), Sudesh Manjhi (19) and Bal Kishore Manjhi (15)—were tortured to death. All of them come from Dalit landless families. (PUDR, 1983A)

Tarari Five 'extremists' were killed by the 'farmers' in Tarari village Konch block, Gaya district, on 18, August, (IE, 20, August)

✓ **Ichagarh** In October people of the Ichagarh block began an agitation demanding the declaration of the area as a drought affected area. On 21, October, about 500 people, under the leadership of Kranthikari Chatra Yuva Morcha, demonstrated outside the Ichagarh Block Office. Police opened fire on the demonstration killing two people; Ajit Mahato and Dananjoy Mahato. Both of them were student leaders of the area. (Frontier, 11, Dec.)

✓ **Palajori** People in Palajori development block of Santbal Paraganas have been agitating for the implementation and extension of various welfare schemes. On 7, October, a group of people, led by 14 out of 17 Mukhiyas of the block demonstrated at the office of the Block Development Officer. Police opened fire on the demonstrators. Four people (unofficial estimates seven) were killed. (PUDR, 1983B)

Goghi Bariarpur Agitation for higher wages picked up in and around Goghi Bariarpur village, Suryagarha block of Monghyr district, in late 1982. In December the labourers forcibly harvested the landlords' land. On 25, December, police arrested the leader of the organisation Ramashish and 80 others. The villagers immediately demonstrated at the local police station, demanding the release of the arrested persons. The police agreed to do so if the landlord had no objection. The people then proceeded to the landlord's house and demonstrated there. The landlord fired nine rounds at the people, killing four young men. The landlord, Chandrika Singh, was secretary of the Suryagarha block congress (I) committee. (Statesman, 21, March, 83, TOI, 23, Jan, 83)

1983

Bhavanichak In early January, Nathuna Singh, a small peasant and an activist of Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti, was
ram

killed by landlords in Bhavanichak, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. (PUDR, 1983A)

Barui Two 'naxalite leaders' were killed in an encounter with the police in Barui village, near Monghyr town in the first week of February. (TOI, 18, Feb.)

Chaurasi Jeydhrath Sharma, a CPI (M) peasant leader, was killed by the goondas of a Zamindar, in Chaurasi village, Madhepura district, in early March. (Ravivar, 26, March)

Surangpur Two symphathisers of Majdoor Kisan Sangarsh Samiti were killed by the landlords on 14, April at Bhavanichak. Both of them, Rohan Paswan, a teacher and Sheo Dayal Paswan, a small peasant were from Surangpur, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. (PUDR, 1983A)

Parthu Two Dalit agricultural labourers of Parthu village, Patna district were killed by armed men of Bhumisena in early May. Both of them were associated with Kisan Sabha. (PI, June)

Tulsichak On Dalit agricultural labourer of Tulsichak village, Patna district was killed by armed men of Bhumisena in early May. He was an activist of Kisan Sabha. (PI, June)

Shahpur Supan Yadav of Chatki village in Bhojpur district was killed in the police lock up in Shahpur on 2, May. Yadav was a landless labourer associated with local peasant organisation. (IE, 21, May.)

Pataria On the night of 8, May, a van load of senior police and administrative officials surrounded the village Pataria, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. Pataria is one of the strong holds of local peasant organisation. They raided and searched all the houses of the village. At dawn a young activist, Pradeep Bhand, was picked up and was interrogated. After the interrogation was over, he was asked to go home. As he turned his back, he was shot dead.

(PUDR, 1983A)

Panpania Police opened fire on a demonstration of peasants in Panpania Gaya district on 10, May. Five agricultural labourers were killed. (IE, 21, May)

Gonsa Inderdev Mochi is a 30 year old Dalit landless labourer and and activist of the Kisan Sangarsh Samiti, from the village Gonsa, Jehanabad block, Gaya district. On 10, May, six Rajput youths armed with rifles come to the village and shot him dead in the premises of his employer's house. His employer is an additional district magistrate of Bihar state. (PUDR, 1983 A)

Pahara Pahadia A 'Naxalite' was killed in Pahara Pahadia village, Palamau district, in an 'encounter' with police in first week of June. (Patriot, 29, June)

Gua Adivasi youth of the Chaibasa region have been agitating against unemployment in Singhbhum district. On 22, June, five of

them went to meet the officials, at Gua, to submit a memorandum. They were arrested by the police. Later they were tied with ropes to the rear of a police jeep and were dragged by the running jeep for over two hundred metres. Later at the market place, they were hung upside down to a beam put across two poles. Then a police squad flogged them continuously. One of them, Vedar Nag Munga, died on the spot. Munga, an adivasi, was a retired army jawan who took part in Bangla Desh war. (Frontier, 16, July)

Patna Shri Kishore Kunal, senior superintendent of police, Patna district, while distributing cash compensation for those killed in agrarian disputes, disclosed that 50 Harijan agricultural labourers were killed by landlords in 1982-1983 in Patna district.

(IE, 14, June, SO, June)

Note : The Journal cited in parenthesis is the source of information for that incident. But the description is not necessarily a verbatim reproduction. The year of publication is the year under which it is listed, unless otherwise stated.)

Abbreviations for the news papers and journals are as follows : *EPW*; Economic And Political Weekly, *IE*; Indian Express, *PI*; probe India, *SE*; Singhbhum Ekta, *SO*; Sunday Observer, *TOI*; Times of India.

Others: RCSCST; Report of the Commissioner For Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, 1979-81, Vol.I.

PUDR, 1981: Agrarian Unrest In Patna.

1983A : Jehanabad-Peasant Movement And Police Repression,
(Combined report with PUCL, Bihar)

1983B : Saharjori-Abandoned Miners of Santhal Parganas.

III Social Contradiction In Bihar

The North and South Bihar plains were governed by the *zamindari* system of land tenure during the British period. The *zamindars* belonged mostly to the upper castes, such as Brahmin, Rajput, and Bhumi-har, though some of them were from the intermediate castes, such as Yadav and Kurmi. Below the *zamindars* in the agrarian hierarchy were various categories of tenants. The last rung of the agrarian hierarchy comprised agricultural labourers and farm servants.

For our purpose two broad categories of tenants may be distinguished: permanent tenants with heritable rights and tenants-at-will. In general, the permanent tenants of the *zamindari* era emerged as a new category of landowners following the abolition of *zamindari*, and it is this category which now dominates rural Bihar, and whose will underlies government action on the agrarian question. They dominate the State legislature and are also well entrenched in the State bureaucracy. Their caste background is not uniform throughout the State, but in general they comprise Bhumi-hars, Rajputs, Brahmins, Yadavs and Kurmis.

The character of the relations of production entered into by these new landowners in the years preceding the Green Revolution depended to a large extent on their caste background. The landowners of the upper castes tended to have much of their lands cultivated by sharecroppers, keeping only some for personal cultivation—a euphemism for cultivation under the supervision of a paid labour manager, commonly known as a *sepahi* in some parts of Bihar. In contrast, the intermediate castes, for whom cultivation had been an established tradition, tended to rely less on sharecropping and more on the direct hiring of agricultural labour.

In the course of the last two decades the differences in the production relations entered into by the two categories of landowners have practically vanished. Since the 1960's there have been a number of development programmes (popularly covered by the term 'Green Revolution') aiming at increasing agricultural production. The opportunities for improving agricultural production through the installation of tube-wells and pumping sets, and the availability of high-yielding seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides have made agriculture—especially for those who can afford the new inputs—a highly commercial proposition. In these circumstances landowners have tended to

regard sharecroppers as an encumbrance, and many a customary, unrecorded, and purely oral lease has come to an abrupt end. The tensions generated when landowners have forcibly sought to dispossess their sharecroppers have been a distinct feature of the Bihar countryside. The sharecroppers lose in legal battles because they have neither the documents nor the resources to match those of their opponents; and in direct confrontations they eventually succumb to the musclemen marshalled by the landowners. The sharecroppers cause appears to be a lost one. An indicator of this is the fact that only one incident in our list pertains to them.

In the contemporary rural setting, especially in the areas dominated by commercialized agriculture, the principal actors are the landowners and the landless agricultural labourers. A substantial number of agricultural labourers are from Dalit castes such as Musahar, Chamar, and Dusadh, but many of them also belong to castes such as Yadav and Kurmi. Traditionally, agricultural labourers were recruited either as permanent farm servants or on a daily basis for specific agricultural operations. It was common for a labourer of either category to be bonded to a particular landowner or *malik* on account of an outstanding debt which he was expected to redeem through his labour. The low level of wages and the continual need to borrow from the *malik* kept the labourer in a perennial state of dependance and bondage. Disputes over wages and the terms of work were alien to such an arrangement since whenever the labourer was in need he approached his *malik* for a loan. Each fresh loan drove him deeper into debt and further reinforced his bondage. The labourer functioned mutely within the constraints of his low social and economic status, for the system of bondage and dependance ensured that he did not offend the *malik* by questioning the terms and conditions of his work.

The opportunities for increasing agricultural production during the last two decades have also released forces exposing the fundamental differences of interest between the landowners and the labourers. The more intensive use of land has increased the demand for agricultural labour. But the services of the labourer are not made available through an impersonal, market-mediated mechanism. The terms and conditions governing the traditional labour arrangements tend to be viewed as the norm, and therefore even the labourers who may be outside the customary ties of dependance are paid low wages. The position of such labourers is made worse by the fact

that nowadays most landowners, except the large ones, tend to avoid being encumbered by the customary arrangements, which entail the advancing of consumption loans from time to time.

In a harsh economic environment, where the costs of basic items are rising steadily, and where consumption loans from employers are restricted, the sheer need for survival has resulted in demands for increasing the wages. The low level of wages are far below the statutory minimum fixed by the State government. For example, in certain parts of Patna district which a PUDR team investigated in December 1981, while the statutory wage for an agricultural labourer was between Rs 4.50 and Rs 5.00 per day excluding a meal, labourers were actually being paid the equivalent of Rs 2.40 a day, excluding a meal. Again in Jehanabad subdivision of Gaya district, a combined PUDR team found that whereas the statutory wage for a labourer was Rs, 8.50 per day, the actual daily payment was the equivalent of Rs, 4.00.

In the traditional social and cultural milieu, in which the dependence of a labourer was inextricably tied up with his low caste and depressed economic status, the servility of the labourer in relation to his *malik* was the norm. In the changed environment when a low-caste labourer questions the wages given to him and demands more favourable terms of work, he is calling into question the entire framework of dependence and subjection which informs the *malik's* perception of the relationship. The tension inherent in such a situation attains an explosive dimension when the desperate labourers try to advance their demands further through organisation. It is in this process that the labourers in various parts of Bihar have become involved with political groups and organisations. In response the *maliks* are indulging in organised burning, looting, and killings as reprisals.

Even though the *maliks* have resorted to such drastic reprisals against the effort of the labourers to better their working conditions, there appears to be a fundamental misrepresentation of the basic issues, both in government circles and in the mass media. In fact there is a tendency to rationalize such events simply as 'atrocities against Harijans', because Harijans comprise a significant element in the population of agricultural labourers. However, as argued above, the element of caste is only one component in the pattern of dependence and subjection underlying the relationship between the *maliks* and the agricultural labourers,

Another source of tension in the Bihar countryside is the illegal control of community land (known as *gair mazarua*) by powerful landowners. During the *zamindari* era *gair mazarua* land was commonly used for grazing cattle, the right of use being acquired through the payment of a nominal rent to the particular *zamindar* who owned it. After the abolition of *zamindari*, this land was controlled by the government. The government may for example allot such land as house sites to Harijans and other depressed sections to relieve the acute congestion in their traditional settlements. However in certain areas *gair mazarua* land is under the illegal occupation of land owners. Peasant organisations in some parts have tried to mobilise the poor to force the illegal occupants to give up this possession so that the land may be used equitably. This has been a recurring source of conflict in the Bihar plains.

The situation in the Chotanagpur plateau is altogether different, with multiple factors governing the social contradictions. An agitation for the creation of a separate Jharkhand state, comprising the whole of the Bihar plateau and parts of Bengal, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, has been going on intermittently for decades in this region. An overt or covert tension between tribals (chiefly Santhals, Oraons, Mundas and Hos) and the non-tribals forms most of the social problems, infusing an ethnic and cultural dimension to the social conflict. At the root of this conflict lie three inter-related problems, land, forests, and industry.

The ^{alienation} ~~abolition~~ of tribal agricultural land has been the source of many rebellions in Chotanagpur since British times. The Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, and the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act, 1949, were designed to arrest this process of alienation. But the lacunae in the acts made it possible for outsiders to defeat their objectives. Later, the government made further changes and brought in the Scheduled Areas Regulation of 1969 and the Chotanagpur Tenancy (Amendment) ordinance, 1979. Yet informal alienation of land was taking place in return for loans given by the *Mahajans*. The continuing lacunae in legislation and the administrative indifference towards its implementation only aided the process. For instance, a PUDR team which surveyed 30 villages in Santhal Parganas district in May, 1983 found evidence of such informal alienation of land in at least 15 villages. In general, this gradual loss of agricultural land has only reinforced the traditional dependance of the tribals on the forests of the region,

The tribals' attempts to assert their traditional rights over forests is an important source of conflict in this region. In recent times Singhbhum district, where 33 percent of the total area consists of forests, has been the centre of these forests movements. Here in mid 1970s government initiated a policy of replacing *sal* and *mahua* forests with teak and an area of 60,000 hectares was earmarked for it. The tribals who find *sal* and *mahua* forests more useful are agitated over the loss of their livelihood due to the plantation of the commercially more profitable teak.

Apart from this replacement in the forests, the government has also made more and more forest areas inaccessible to tribals by declaring them as 'reserve forest' areas. The steady increase in reserved forests areas has led to the total loss of entire tribal villages. Every tribal village had a burial ground which occupied a central place in the tribal system of beliefs. The loss of burial grounds thus hit at the root of their cultural and religious value system. The tribals in recent times have been reasserting their rights over the villages swept under the wave of commercialization.

Commercial motives, which served as the rationale of government's forest policy, have also led to the declaration of cultivable lands as 'forest areas'. This arbitrary re-classification of forest lands has led to a further loss of tribal agricultural land, forcing them on to an agitational path.

The cumulative effect of the tribals' loss of their traditional rights over forests should be seen in the context of the intense competition for forest resources. In the Chotanagpur plateau large scale deforestation has taken place due to programmes of industrialisation. A number of big industrial projects have come up in the region in the past three decades, as a result of which more than eleven thousand hectares of forests were lost. In addition, river valley projects, such as the multi purpose Subernarekha project, also led to the destruction of forests and even the total submersion of villages. The tribals displaced by these development projects are never adequately compensated. As a result in many parts of the region, tribals are expressing themselves against these development projects.

The local tribals appear to derive the least benefit from the industries in the area. In most of the heavy industries, where the

proportion of skilled labour is relatively high, tribals have no place. Even for unskilled jobs, the employers, both in the public and private sectors, have a preference for non-tribal outsiders. This discriminatory employment policy against those who have been displaced by these industries leads to further resentment among the tribals.

In underpaid jobs, as in mines, where tribals are employed, their working and living conditions become a source of discontent. In Kolhan area, for instance, where a large number of mines are operating, the tribal labourers working under contractors are denied statutory minimum wages. In the case of Meghadataburu Iron Ore Mines, which has been taken up by the PUDR, even the Supreme Court's orders were not followed by the contractors, and this has led to an agitation among the tribals.

These multiple factors, located in the alienation of the tribal land, the loss of traditional rights over forests and the increasing pauperization of the tribals, due to development projects have caused them to become ^{involved} ~~involved~~ with political organisation. In the Chotanagpur plateau in contrast to the ^{plans} ~~plans~~, it is the policies of the state which are the source of the contradictions and it is the state which is directly retaliating against the people.

It is one of the major ironies of the practice of democracy in contemporary India—and Bihar provides an outstanding example—that the agencies of state authority, including the police and the district administration, play a major role in crushing the attempts to organise the most downtrodden sections of rural society. Neither politicians of the ruling party nor members of the bureaucracy at the state or local levels have been willing to perceive the basic issues underlying the struggles of the Adivasis and agricultural labourers. There is an unmistakable tendency to unhesitatingly brand their struggles as 'extremist' or 'Naxalite' or 'anti-social'—even though the objective may be simply the implementation of the laws made by the government itself. The most disturbing element in this picture is that these agencies have implicitly or explicitly collaborated with the private organisations of vested interests to suppress the poor. This policy on the part of the state cannot be viewed as accidental. The long list of people killed testifies to a deliberate pattern of conflict determined by class interests. The struggle for survival, which also necessarily implies a struggle for better conditions of work, has unleashed the forces of terror and repression nurtured jointly by these interests and the state. This is the ~~reality~~ ^{reality} that underlies the political killings of so many people in rural Bihar.

IV Appendix

Source of Tension	Number of Killings
Agrarian Tensions	163 (165)
Tribal problems	16
Others	6 (9)

Total 185 (190)

Discription of Attackers	Number of Killings
Landlords or their men	108
Police	60 (65)
Landlord & Police	5
Others	7
Unknown	5

Total 185 (190)

Nature of Attack	Number of Killings
Armed mob attacks	54
Selective murders	19
Police Firings	42 (47)
Police Encounters	18
Others	4
Not Known	48

Total 185 (190)

Districtwise Break-up

Patna	71	Katihar	4
Gaya	45	Rohtas	4
Singhbhum	18	Muzafarpur	2
Madhubani	7 (9)	Madhepur	1
Aurangabad	7	Palamau	1
Bhagalpur	7	East Champaran	1
Monghyr	6	Hazaribagh	1
Bhojpur	5	Purnea	1
Santhal Paraganas	4 (7)		

Total 185 (190)

(Note : The figures in bracket give unofficial estimates. In case of Patna district official figures given by SSP, for 1982-83 have been taken. Presuming that it includes the 7 killings from Patna district, listen in the text, the figures for the year 1982-1983 will be 43.)

