

The Dehuli Massacre

Killing With Impunity

"MY resignation over the Dehuli issue is not important, law and order is," was Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh's answer when asked why, after owning moral responsibility for the massacre, he had not quit. "Either we protect the survivors, and liquidate the killers, or we might as well find somebody else to run this state," Singh told INDIA TODAY at Mainpuri on November 23. "I don't want it said by history," he added, "that two murderers threw out my government." That evening Singh airdashed to Delhi and met the prime minister, and the next day in Lucknow he announced that he was giving himself exactly a month to improve the law and order situation. At fortnight's end, though, it seemed as though law and order would force Singh's exit.

Dehuli is a comparatively large village (population 900) in western Mainpuri district of Uttar Pradesh. About 24 of its 100-odd families are Jatavs (cobblers) and Rangias (tanners); 40 are Thakurs, a dozen are Muslim, and the rest are an assortment of lesser castes. The fields around are planted

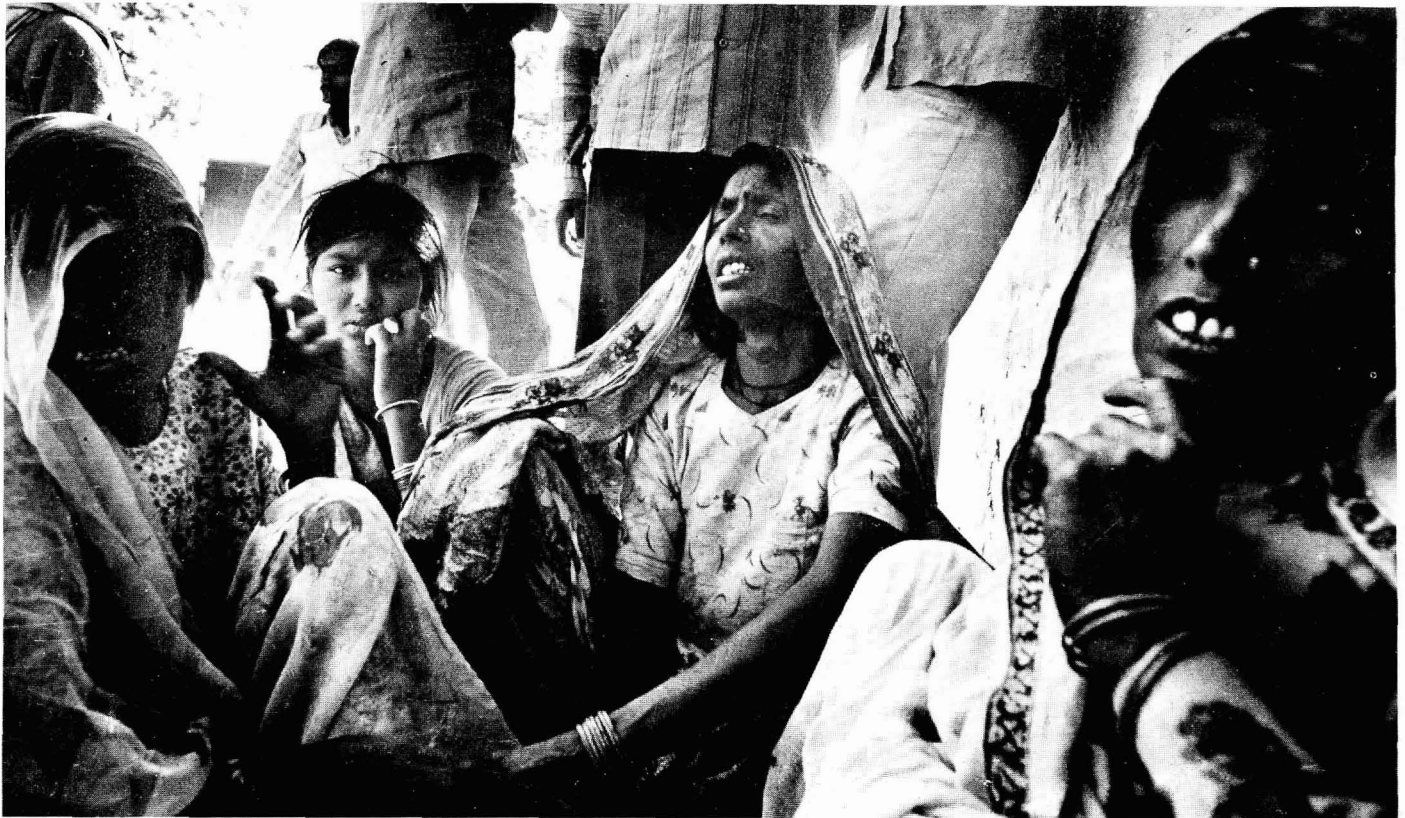
with paddy, mustard, and potatoes. Death struck violently and without warning at Dehuli's Jatavs on November 18. At 4.30 p.m. on that fateful day, a gang of 16 armed assassins, dressed in fake police uniforms and led by two Thakur youths, Radheshyam Singh (Radhey) and Santosh Singh (Santosha), moved in suddenly from the nearby fields. For four hours, the killers systematically hunted out and gunned down every Jatav in sight. When the gunfire died down, 24 bodies lay strewn about the *basti*.

Casualties: A few Jatavs miraculously escaped death. Six were grievously wounded. One boy was hidden in a cupboard by his mother. Two infants were thrown on to the roof of their hut by their mother, who herself died. Two young Jatav men evaded the killers by burrowing deep into haystacks. Among them was a young man of 24 years, Kunwar Prasad. Prasad's luck was remarkable, for he was one of the prime targets of the killers, along with his father Latoori Prasad, 70. Latoori and quite a few other able-bodied Jatavs were out working in the fields when the attackers came. They hid out

there all night long, while the killers, after a hearty meal, spent the night in the village's Radhakrishna temple till daybreak.

When the outside world finally got to Dehuli, Kunwar Prasad wasn't around. He was 16 km away, at the R. N. M. Civil Hospital at Shikohabad, tending his young wife. It was Latoori, instead, who hit the headlines in the local press. He was the worst affected: eight members of his family had been killed, and each of his four brothers' families suffered casualties. Latoori fell at each visitor's feet, grief-stricken, and begged that he and his surviving relatives be taken far away, to Agra, to safety.

Not surprisingly, few people bothered to visit the Shikohabad hospital. Most preferred to travel 48 km further east to Mainpuri, where the bodies lay in the mortuary, and where six doctors worked through two days to conduct post-mortems. The killers had used mostly 12-bores, rifles, and country pistols. They shot at point-blank range, either at the victim's chest or neck. Their ammunition had been recharged with lethal buckshot, and the wounds were horrific.



Wailing women mourn the dead: a violent outburst

Tragic: The scene at the Shikohabad hospital was heart-rending, and yet indicative of general apathy. The seven injured included a Muslim boy shot in the hand and let off by the killers when it was discovered he wasn't a Jatav. Two bored young doctors desultorily fielded questions. They were more interested in reading newspaper reports of the carnage. Inside the ward, the conditions were shockingly unhygienic. Two of the wounded, an 8-month baby called Munni, and Neelam, a one-and-a-half-year-old girl, had been shot in their necks. Both lay in their bloodied bandages, covered with flies. The older victims picked at some food ordered in by the hospital from a nearby *dhaba*. Even as late as on November 22, four days after the carnage, the victims had not been operated upon for the removal of the bullets.

Kunwar Prasad's wife Sarwati, 20, was holding her infant son Rajesh when the killers came. The same bullet killed Rajesh and pierced Sarwati's chest. She sat there, numb and frozen, unable to answer questions. Incoherent with grief, and yet angry ("Who will do anything for us?") Kunwar Prasad described how he had lost his brothers Ram Prasad and Ram Sewak, his sisters-in-law Singarwati and Shanti Devi, and his sister Rajendri, who had come visiting. Greater still was the grief in Latoori's household when news came from the Mainpuri mortuary that the pregnant Shanti Devi had been carrying twins, a boy and a girl.

Latoori Prasad's was one of the four Jatav families owning a few *bighas* of cultivable land. His four brothers, Chunnilal, Vedram, Pyarelal and Panchilal, lived close by. Chunnilal lost his daughter-in-law Asha Devi, Vedram his sons Dataram and Bharat Singh, and Panchilal his relative Lalaram Pyarelal's wife Ganga and son Harnarain were wounded. There was reason for the killers' especial animosity towards Latoori and his relatives. The origins of the Dehuli massacre lay some years back, when Chunnilal's son Kunwar Pal used to head the gang, in which Radhey was lieutenant. Three years ago, Kunwar Pal fell out with Radhey's friend Santosha. It is also alleged that he made a pass at a Thakur woman.

The Gang: Kunwar Pal's relatives found his headless body one morning beside

the adjoining Ghoghniipur Branch Canal. Nobody notified the police of the murder, and the Radhey-Santosha gang roamed the surrounding countryside, looting travellers and committing occasional murders. Until last fortnight's massacre, the gang did not figure in a single police file. Eighteen months ago, however, a Jatav tipped off the police at Jasrana, 12 km away, that the gang was in the village. The police swooped down, arres-

from surrounding villages to escape the dragnet. By November 23, in fact, the gang had moved into Agra district. Meanwhile, Dehuli had to tolerate the visitors. The influx began on November 20 when two helicopters brought V. P. Singh, his Home Minister Swaroop Kumari Bakshi, and Union Home Minister Zail Singh. The VIPs, after commiserating with the victims' families, announced grants of aid in cash and kind.

The money was later placed in post office accounts at Jasrana, and an army of district employees distributed Rs 10,000 worth of food, blankets, quilts and utensils.

There appeared to be a conscious attempt to downplay the Dehuli incident. Jagjivan Ram was the only prominent opposition leader to travel to the village. Mrs Gandhi went there only on November 27. Accompanied by V. P. Singh and Mrs Bakshi, she travelled by helicopter from Agra and spent two hours talking to the affected families.

None of the visiting ministers experienced the rigours of travelling by road to the village. Access to it is gained by a road that branches left immediately Shikohabad, and then runs for an unending, 16-km stretch alongside the Ghoghniipur canal, an incredibly dusty and rutted track. Cavalcades of Matador pickups, jeeps and cars, bedecked with hastily painted banners and black flags, nevertheless braved the journey to Dehuli. It seemed as though Uttar Pradesh's goriest massacre had become its biggest tourist attraction after the Taj Mahal. At the village, clusters of gawping people filed through the twisting alleys between the rude, thatched mud huts. The silence of death hung over each Jatav home. Men and women still in the grip of a numbing grief broke out now and then into uncontroll-

able sobs. At least ten mud courtyards bore clearly visible pools of dried blood.

Anarchy: Aid, consolation and curiosity, however, could not erase the implications of the Dehuli tragedy. For one thing, it illustrated the rapid descent into anarchy of 12 of western Uttar Pradesh's dacoit and criminal infested districts. For another, it showed up the hypocrisy of paper-thin land reforms and the permanence of the vested caste-class power structure. Dehuli's Jatavs, for instance, had been awarded title deeds for 10 *bighas* of land apiece in 1973.



Asha's clothes and chappals lying near the door: old enmity

ted two gang members, and seized some arms. They roped in four Jatavs—Maharam, Balasahab, Mitthoolal and Anjanlal—as witnesses. That was when the gang swore revenge, and the case became one of the Thakurs against the Jatavs.

The Jatavs say that the village's Thakurs pooled money to equip the gang with its arsenal. In any case, 40 people taken in by the police for questioning failed to reveal substantial clues as to the gang's whereabouts. The police privately believed that the gang was being helped by Thakurs

But they haven't been allowed by the Thakurs to even demarcate their land, most of which is *oosar* (uncultivable) anyway. They are forced to work as agricultural labourers for paltry daily wages of Rs 6.

A district official revealed that as many as 15,000 gun licences had been issued in Mainpuri district alone. There was no count of illegal arms. Violence and dacoity are endemic. In the 12 affected districts, for instance, there have been 1,206 murders and 596 dacoities, this year. Law-keeping is non-existent, and the marauders' stratagem of donning police or army uniforms foxes both pursuers and victims. Dehuli's surviving Jatavs do not trust the police one bit, and prefer the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) or the Border Security Force (BSF). A 26-man platoon of the PAC mounted guard on the Jatav quarter the day after the carnage. Harijan suspicion of the police also stems from the fact that most policemen belong to the upper castes. There are 22 police stations in Mainpuri district, where 24 per cent of the population of 17 lakh consists of Harijans, but only one station in-charge is a Harijan.

Belated Action: Additional Inspector-General of Police Tushar Dutt, who is in-charge of Jhansi division and the Kanpur and Agra ranges, insists that there were only 115 murders in the areas under his command this year against 135 last year, and that 82 dacoits had so far been killed in 124 encounters. Satish Kumar Mukherjee, DIG,

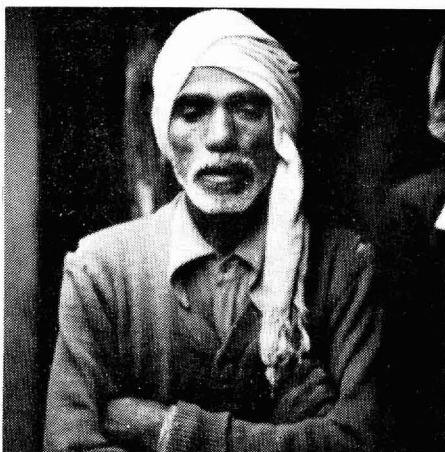
Agra range, said he could not understand why so many licences had been issued for high-calibre rifles that were as good as the police force's. He also said that he would not take the innocence of the scheduled castes for granted. Mainpuri's District Magistrate Ajit Seth said that he had suspended the arms licences of the three registered Thakur families in Dehuli. He had also ordered the immediate issuance of arms licences to eight Jatav families. It was ironical that the Jatavs should get licences after the carnage.

The massacre spurred the state Government into belated action. V. P. Singh convened a high-level officials' meeting at Mainpuri, the district headquarters, on November

23. Later, it was announced that the state Government would issue an ordinance providing for pre-trial detention of dacoits up to six months, to facilitate investigation. Police outposts and their strengths would be improved in number, and the police would have greater mobility, and greatly enhanced compensation for the next-of-kin of those killed or wounded in anti-dacoity operations, which would henceforth be looked after by freshly-appointed additional superintendents of police. The chief minister alleged that the Janata government had indiscriminately distributed arms licences. He admitted that land reforms had scarcely changed the feudal structure in the state's villages.

Meanwhile, the nation reacted to the Dehuli bloodbath with shock, horror and a sense of fatalism. While the debate over the massacre rocked Parliament during the first two days of its winter session, *The Statesman* editorialised that "the most horrendous forms of caste tyranny can flourish with impunity" in Uttar Pradesh. Jagjivan Ram demanded that Harijans should be settled in separate villages and given arms for self-defence. Dehuli occurred nine months after dacoit queen Phoolan Devi killed 20 Thakurs in Jalaun district's Behmai village. Suddenly, it seemed as though India's largest state was ruled not by its inept government, but by the power that flows from thousands of cruel guns.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG in Dehuli



Latoori Prasad: worst affected

Chaitanya Kalbag



S. Premi

A surviving woman of the Jatav community mourns her husband: a shocking bloodbath