

MADHYA PRADESH

Of Inhuman Bondage

VISUALLY, the scene was vintage Bergman. A low canopy of sullen clouds scudded over a landscape whipped by icy winds. Despair seemed to be wrung out of every muscle of the ragged bunch of men stumbling down the village's main dirt street. There were 15 of them, all walking with the collapsing gait of acute drunkards. At least four of them were scarcely able to maintain a vertical position; even the two poles they used to drag their shrivelled legs along did not ease their expressions of slow-motion agony.

With one or two exceptions, the men were all bonded labourers, a class that had been abolished on paper by the Government six and a half years back. The village's name was Panasi, but throughout the surrounding district of Rewa in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh, it was known as *langda gaon* (lame village). The shambling men with the useless legs were victims of a terrifying disease called 'lathyrism', a disease that leads to spastic paraplegia, or jerky paralysis, of the lower extremities.

Deadly Wages: Worse still, the disease had not struck the men out of the blue, or through some mysterious virus in the air. Lathyrism is a direct result of man's inhumanity towards his unluckier inferiors, a social inferiority that has been built up over the centuries into an unbearable burden of suffering. Caused by the sustained consumption of a harmless-looking pea named *lathyrus sativus*—called *Kesari daal* or *matara* locally—lathyrism is the physical spin-off of bondage, and there is no cure for it.

For centuries, Rewa district's agricultural labourers have been subjected to the most primitive system of serfdom in India. In Panasi and the nearby villages, at least one-tenth of the people are bonded labourers. They have never used money as a medium of exchange, and their lives revolve around the deadly lathyrus seeds—for a full day's back-breaking work in their masters' fields, each one of them 'earns' a paltry wage of 1.65 kg of the seeds. The only occasions



PICTURES BY RAGHU RAI

An old, crippled labourer leans on his indispensable poles: man's inhumanity to man

LYTHIRISM

Seeds Of Suffering

TWO events last fortnight focussed attention on lathyrism and bonded labour. On March 6, a team of researchers from the Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF) released a report on bonded labour and lathyrism in Panasi, Manika and Jhotia, three villages in Madhya Pradesh's Rewa district. The research had been financed by the Harijan and Tribal Welfare Department of the Madhya Pradesh Government, and state Chief Minister Arjun Singh was on hand in Delhi at the release ceremony.

A day earlier, Justice P.N. Bhagwati of the Supreme Court, on the basis of an application sent to him by the GPF's Jyoti Prakash, issued four weeks' notice to Satna and Rewa district authorities asking for surveys of bonded labour and its connections with lathyrism.

Bleak Findings: There was a grim symbolism to the developments: a nationwide survey of bonded labour conducted by the GPF, whose findings were published in May last year, showed that Madhya Pradesh contained as many as 5 lakh of the estimated 26 lakh bonded labourers in the country. Moreover, a National Commission on Agriculture report in 1976 showed that lathyrus cultivation accounted for as much as 44 per cent of the total land under foodgrains.

The latest GPF survey of the three villages in Rewa showed even bleaker findings. Of the 63 afflicted families, at least a third were those of bonded labourers, and 44.4 per cent were 'free' labourers—which proved that Rewa's landlords chose to ignore the Government-prescribed minimum wage of Rs 7 a day, and continued to pay their labourers in kind.

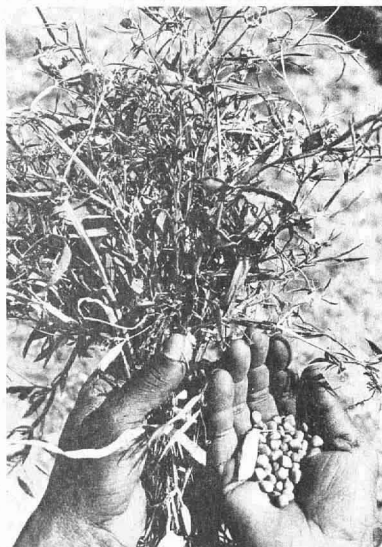
That was not all. The survey showed that 56.6 per cent of the disabled were either Adivasis or Harijans, and only 2.5 per cent of the cultivable land was owned by these communities. Lathyrism never struck the larger landlords, and only two or three of Panasi's victims owned as much as between one and eight acres of land.

Long History: India is one of the two countries in the world that has not banned the cultivation of the poisonous *matara* seed. There was a big outbreak of lathyrism in Ethiopia in 1976, when 1,374 cases were reported after a severe famine. But lathyrism has been endemic in Madhya Pradesh, and contiguous parts

of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, for nearly two centuries.

In particular, the Rewa, Satna, Sidhi, Shahdol, Chhatarpur and Tikamgarh districts of Madhya Pradesh have a long history of lathyrism. The first reference to lathyrism in the Rewa region occurs in General W.H. Sleeman's *Rambles And Recollections of an Indian Official* in 1844. An Indian Medical Service officer called A. Buchanan, in two separate reports in 1904 and 1927, gave detailed analyses of lathyrism outbreaks during the great famine years of 1896–1907. In 1922, H.W. Acton estimated 60,000 lathyrism cases in northern Rewa ("a territory half the size of Scotland").

Only once before, in the early 1900s, did a judge called Fuller prosecute a landlord who fed his labourers *matara* under Section 328 of the Indian Penal Code, which prescribes punishment of imprisonment up to 10 years and fine for



The plant and *matara* seeds: toxic

"whoever administers to or causes to be taken by any person any poison or any stupefying, intoxicating or unwholesome drug..."

Powerful Toxin: Surveys show that even a regular one-third of lathyrus in a diet can lead to the disease. The pea itself is full of contradictions: it has a protein content of between 28 and 30 per cent, higher than any other pulse. But of the 26

varieties of lathyrus growing in India, almost all contain a deadly 2 per cent of a rare amino-acid toxin called Beta-oxalyl-amino-alanine (BOAA). This tiny percentage is sufficient to cause lathyrism.

Scientists at the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) in Hyderabad succeeded in isolating the lathyrus toxin in crystal form in the mid-'60s. According to scientific and governmental advice, the seeds ought to be soaked in boiling water and then decanted in order to detoxify them before eating. Another method advocated is to parboil the seeds just as in the case of rice, in large quantities.

But all this propaganda has not stemmed the sporadic incidence of lathyrism. Moreover, the bonded labourers work from dawn to dusk in the fields and are only then given their daily wage of seeds. They therefore do not have the time, or the equipment, to attempt to detoxify the seeds at home.

There is controversy about whether soaking or decantation or parboiling actually detoxifies the seed. Experiments conducted privately in Rewa apparently show that consecutive batches of water obtained by boiling the same sample of seeds show increasing toxin levels. On the other hand, the seed is also said to lose its proteins in the water.

Spreading Danger: The total lack of research on detoxification is added to by the apathy of scientists. Argues NIN Director P.G. Tulpule: "Since agro-ecological changes are leading to a decline in fresh outbreaks of lathyrism, we are not doing any further research. We do not deny the possibility of isolated cases, but because of various factors further research plans have been shelved."

Taking this logic further, Dr C. Gopalan, director of the Nutrition Foundation of India in Delhi, points out that lathyrus seeds are increasingly being exported to other states to adulterate *besan*. "Thus," says Gopalan, "the poor labourers of Rewa are being saved, but the pulse is now being freely distributed to other states. Since detoxification will mean an increase in cost, I doubt if the traders and rich farmers will even come forward with their stocks for detoxification."

While there has never been a proper nationwide survey of lathyrism, scientists at the NIN claim that there has been no major outbreak of the disease in Madhya Pradesh since the last epidemic in 1974. A NIN survey in 1980 in Rewa, Satna, Durg and Raipur districts reportedly showed that most lathyrism cases consisted of long-term sufferers.



Afflicted villagers: silent suffering

But doctors at the S.S. Medical College in Rewa say that a fresh outbreak occurred after a drought in 1979; moreover, a seminar on lathyrism in Rewa on November 29 last year pointed out that at least 100 cases of paraplegia had been noticed between June 1980 and June 1981, of which 30 were 'sub-acute' or 'onset' lathyrism patients. The doctors concluded that the "incidence of paraplegia due to lathyrism (30 per cent) recorded in (the) present series is the highest among other reported works".

The sale, possession for sale, or use of *lathyrus sativus* as an ingredient in preparing any foodstuff for sale is banned in several states under the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1961. Significantly, there is no such ban in Madhya Pradesh. Nor does the Madhya Pradesh Government propose to ban cultivation of the seed; its facile argument is that lathyrus, if consumed together with other pulses, is not poisonous.

At most, scientists have recommended that the Government impose a levy on lathyrus cultivators, and the Rewa seminar suggested the setting up of a lathyrism commission "which will look lathyrism with its aim to eradicate the disease by 2000 A.D."

on which these people see hard cash is when they borrow money from their masters to finance death or marriage ceremonies, or treatment for some illness.

In all everyday transactions, the grain the bondsmen are given at day's end serves as currency, part of it exchanged at the local market for staples like salt and oil, and it forms their total diet. Dried *matara* is powdered and the resulting flour used to make rough *rotis*; the same seeds are boiled, flavoured with salt, and eaten as *daal* along with the *matara rotis*.

Sinister Purpose: When INDIA TODAY visited Panasi on March 5, there was a sense of gloom in the village: hailstorms had struck the area a few days earlier, and Panasi's landlords anticipated a crop failure. "You can imagine what that means," said Prabhakar Singh, one of the village's biggest landowners. "Only the *matara* crop will survive this blight, and so I will have to give my labourers only this seed. And that means a fresh outbreak of the disease."

Another of the visitors that day was Dr Madhav Prasad Dwivedi, who has been studying lathyrism since 1954. Now head of the department of preventive and social medicine at the S.S. Medical College in Rewa, Dwivedi pointed out that outbreaks of lathyrism usually occur after drought or crop failure. It was true that the consump-

tion of lathyrus seeds in Panasi had dropped during the last two years, but this was because other crops like wheat, barley, lentils and Bengal gram had flourished. The blue, red and white flowered *matara* plants could still be seen in Panasi's fields, and it was evident that they flourished even if they were not tended.

There was another reason for the drop in *matara* consumption: Panasi's landlords had discovered that the seed fetched a higher price in the market place. Against Rs 175 per quintal for wheat, the seed was fetching Rs 250 a quintal. And this too had a sinister purpose—unscrupulous traders were buying the seed because they could use its powder to adulterate *besan* (*chana* flour), and *chana* currently sells for Rs 375 a quintal.

Deprivation: As Panasi's lathyrism victims clustered around Dwivedi, discussing the progress of the disease, there was a dull feeling of unmitigated despair in the air. The terrain, as far as the eye could see, was similarly stark. At first sight, it did not appear too barren, but Prabhakar Singh said that due to reasonably good rainfall, farmers in the Baghelkhand region had not developed any irrigation facilities. It is when the rains fail, or when there is adverse cold or hail, that the farmers face disaster. This is why the farmers routinely plant lathyrus as a fall-back crop together with barley, wheat, and



A young man holds his diseased leg out for inspection: a vicious cycle through the generations

Bengal gram. Lathyrus shows a particular affinity for the predominantly sandy-red soil.

There was deprivation in the bonded labourers' living conditions, too. Panasi's landless live in a separate and ramshackle colony at a distance from the quarter of the landlords. Prabhakar Singh claims that he owns only 13.5 acres of land, but he and his four brothers, say other villagers, own a large tract between themselves. Singh alone employs as many as 12 bonded labourers. There is an unfeeling logic to his arguments.

"The labourers depend totally on us," he says. "What more can I do? The *matara* grows wild, by itself, it is almost weed-like. My family has been here for four centuries, and most of the land is still capable of yielding only one crop a year. And the yield is only one measly quintal per acre. We will be only too glad if the Government lifts the labourers out of their misery. I cannot do anything myself. I cannot pay them cash. I look after them like a father, I pay for their medical expenses, I lend them money. And still the Government does not introduce proper irrigation. I have a little bit of irrigation and so I do not give my labourers

matara as far as possible."

Fatalism: So it is a classic Catch-22 situation: it is up to the outside world to emancipate these slaves, but emancipation cannot come about through mere irrigation, or even land distribution. There is no land left to distribute, complain Panasi's landlords. "Instead," says Singh, "the labourers ought to be drawn into cottage industries so that they earn a little cash. That will automatically lead to a change in diet, and even the farmers will learn that they cannot depend forever on their labourers."

But fatalism has the labourers in its grip. They know that eating the deadly seed leads to lathyrism, but they cannot comprehend its power to destroy their lives, and they cannot stop eating it. The disease has affected generations of labourers—there is the Kole Adivasi Baiju, Panasi's most recent victim, whose father was a victim before him. And there is Ramsaran, a Harijan, another second-generation victim. Every time the bread-earner succumbs to the disease, the only fate in store for the family is starvation—or the bondage of the women and children, and the perpetuation of the cycle.

THE tragedy is compounded by the villagers' superstitions. As the wind rises, and with it the cold, the lathyrism victims huddle together for warmth and mutter that the evil *purvaiya* (wind from the east) carries the disease with it. The fact, however, is that the acid levels in their bodies rise with starvation and not cold, and that the deadly toxin in the *matara* seeds acts more easily on their weakened blood vessels, cutting off nutrition to nerve tissue, leading to spasms in their spinal cords—and paraplegia below their waists.

Lathyrism is doubly cruel because it rarely strikes women. Most of its victims are able men between the ages of 16 and 30. Only two girls in Panasi, below the age of 12, had fallen victim to the disease. In any case, it seemed to strike women either before puberty or after menopause. Moreover, the women usually eat very little, preferring to give most of the available seed to their menfolk—and this in itself is a kindness fraught with cruelty.

And so the future looked as bereft of hope as last year, or the year before that, or the decades before that. The rabi (winter)

crop is harvested in March, and if other crops fail this year, Panasi's landless are going to have nothing to eat but the deadly *matara*. Previous surveys have shown a sharp increase in the incidence of lathyrism in the months of Ashadh and Sawan (June and July). This year promises to be no different. One of Panasi's landlords reinforces the overpowering sense of being in a situation with no exit signs at all. "Why talk in noble terms of bonded labour?" he asks with a laugh. "Do you think the Government's own 'food-for-work' programme is anything but bondage by another name?"

Growing Trap: Panasi and its forlorn cluster of maimed men, huddled together near an unseeing clay idol of Hanuman, gives rise to the feeling that nothing, at this rate, can change the social system in Madhya Pradesh. On Holi, March 10, hundreds of villages in the region, witnessed an annual ceremony. It was the only day in the entire year when the bonded labourers could opt out of the system by repaying their debts—or renew their contracts, which was what actually happened. No bonded labourer had ever succeeded in freeing himself from the ever-growing trap, and the only way he could deceive himself into a semblance of freedom was to borrow the requisite amount from another landlord, pay off last year's master, and pledge himself to a new one.

The circle is truly vicious, and the symbolism of one village like Panasi out of a thousand is only that—paper reforms, and lame concern, for a problem that does not exist for the people who discuss it. Suddenly, in that tiny pocket of human habitation, the outside world seems to recede into heartless history. Bondage is the poor man's only fate, and lathyrism a poor man's disease.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

BONDED LABOUR

Free In Name Only

THE Madhya Pradesh Government has realised that unpleasant facts cannot always be swept under the carpet. Sometimes the carpet rolls back and the dirt underneath can no longer be ignored. A Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF) survey conducted during 1980–81 had shown that there were as many as 547 bonded labourers in 11 villages in the Majhagawan block in Satna district. In particular, GPF workers focussed on one village, Nayagaon, where alone 47 bonded families were identified.

Like elsewhere in the state, bondage had become inevitable because of the labourers' poverty. Small loans that would not matter to a city-dweller, ranging between Rs 100 and Rs 1,000, had accumulated interest of as much as 36 per cent annually. Since the labourer never earned cash, the loans could never possibly be repaid.

Nayagaon, significantly, is a relatively large and well-kept village (population: 4,687). On February 18, Satna District Magistrate Manoj Kumar, compelled by the weight of evidence, and the news that the GPF would soon be approaching the Supreme Court for redress, finally visited Nayagaon with revenue and bank officials. Earlier, district authorities had fabricated reports claiming that no bonded labourers existed in the village.

Monetary Aid: After announcing that all bonded labourers were free from

that day onwards, Kumar worked out plans to grant each bondsman a sum of Rs 500 and monetary aid for any vocation the labourer might want to enter into. But Kumar's exertions had only turned up 34 of the 47 bonded families, and there was going to be a delay in the arrival of governmental largesse—the money would start moving only after the new financial year began in April.

It all seemed hopeless, because Nayagaon's landlords, secure in their feeling that the labourers had no one else to depend upon, flatly refused to pay their labourers the Government-stipulated minimum wage of Rs 7 a day. "We'll see where they get their loans from," fumed landlord Chhatrapal Singh, and *patwari* Badri Prasad Tripathi said that the landlords would on no account pay their labourers a paisa during the lean non-farming season (which can extend up to six months in the year).

On the village's outskirts, 52 landless labourers were building themselves rough mud-and-wood huts on land allotted by the Government seven years back. An earlier attempt to build houses had been wrecked by the landlords' musclemen, and only a long court case had finally secured the labourers their rights. Only 23 of the would-be home-owners, however, were bonded, and the others spoke about what lay in store for them: the need to borrow money to make up for the loss of earnings during the construction period, and so the inevitability of bondage for even the 'free' labourers.

Ironic Demand: There was another irony in Nayagaon. Its bonded labourers, who earned a daily wage of 1.5 kg of barley, complained that the grain did not suffice. Instead, they wanted their masters to give them *matara* seeds, which were being sold in the outside markets. Nayagaon's bondsmen felt that *matara* had strength, but they did not know that it could bring on the terrible lathyrism.

Kumar told INDIA TODAY that Nayagaon was being taken up as a 'pilot' project and only now would bonded labourers in nearby villages be surveyed. The situation was summed up by the ludicrousness of one of Kumar's plans. "There is a good village band in Nayagaon," said he, "and so we have arranged that the bandmaster ought to, for a fixed sum, train some freed bondsmen in various musical instruments."

Humans under the yoke in Panasi: unmitigated despair

