

Belchhi and Pipra Revisited

Has anything changed in the two Bihar villages that hit the headlines?

Text by Chaitanya Kalbag Pictures by Kamal Sahai

SIX kilometres from Harnaut, the jeep broke down in the mud. The slipper-shod lady decided to continue her journey on elephant-back. Perched dangerously behind her and the *mahout* was another lady, a member of Parliament. It took the elephant three hours to reach its destination: a small village called Belchhi. Mrs Indira Gandhi started out on her comeback trail at Belchhi, recalled the exhausted Kedar Pandey two days later at Patna.

Mrs Gandhi at Belchhi: unseated protector of the downtrodden

Pandey had had to walk the slush- and water-filled route to Belchhi and was having his aching legs massaged.

That it was a clever political manoeuvre was evident. The Belchhi atrocity had occurred on May 27, 1977. Although Mrs Gandhi reached Belchhi only on August 13 that year, she pre-empted other would-be pilgrims, chief among them a chagrined YB Chavan. Her companion on the elephant, Mrs Pratibha Sinha, seemed to view the trip as more of a discom-

fort than a distinction. Barely five months after her defeat at the hands of the Janata, Indira Gandhi seemed determined to project herself as the unseated protector of the downtrodden.

There were a few discordant notes at Belchhi, however. Some people raised a sullen slogan: *Haarti nahin to aati nahin* (she wouldn't have come if she hadn't lost). The difficulty of the journey to Belchhi seemed to have dampened Mrs Gandhi's crusading spirit. She politely declined a suggestion that she meet the families of all the eleven Belchhi victims, and contented herself with visiting the patch of land where they had been burnt to death by their attackers. "It is getting late," she said. "It will be dark soon." Kedar Pandey rose to the occasion by calling the excursion "another Dandi march". He said that his party had decided to donate blankets and saris to the bereaved families.

The next day Mrs Gandhi met Jayaprakash Narayan at his Kadam Kuan residence in Patna, and the old man, overwhelmed by her gesture, wished her good luck and "a brighter future". Whoever had said that the ex-prime minister was politically finished?

All eleven victims of the Belchhi massacre were Harijans—three Sonar brothers, and eight Dusadhs. The attackers were all Kurmis. Belchhi is a small village. It contains 25 Kurmi households, and 70 Dusadh and Mushar Harijan families. Situated right on the border of Patna district with Nalanda district, Belchhi and Nalanda are in the tight grip of the Kurmi landlords, who own much of the fertile land in that region.

Perhaps the most caste-ridden state in India Bihar's class delineations run along caste lines. Stop any stranger to ask for directions in a Bihar town and you will invariably be greeted by three questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? and finally, Which caste do you belong to? The upper castes—Brahmins, Rajputs, Kayasthas, and Bhumihars—comprise 7 per cent of Bihar's population, but monopolise the job market. The intermediate castes—the Kurmis, the Koeris, and the Yadavs, who are included in the Backward Classes—own most of the land in the Patna and Nalanda districts; their affluence and political clout have lent them an upper-caste status. The lowest on the



caste ladder are the Harijans (a term that is anathema to castes in that category)—the Dusadhs (who are usually landless labourers), Chamars (traditionally the cobbler caste) and the Domes, who traditionally tended funeral pyres in crematoria.

It is quite common for the powerful Kurmi and Yadav landlords to enforce their supremacy with the help of gangs of armed henchmen. There is even supposed to be an informal 'Rifle-men's Party', consisting of these kulak overlords. Some of the kulak muscle-power is provided by Harijans who have been bought over.

The incident: Mahavir Mahato, a Kurmi who owned 18 *bighas* of good land around Belchhi and a brick kiln, was the undisputed master of the area. He was backed up by two Kurmi overlords of Nalanda district—In-

dradeo Chowdhry and Arun Chowdhry. Things soured, however, when a young Dusadh called Sindheshwar Paswan (Sindhwa) arrived in Belchhi to stay with his father-in-law Kalicharan Paswan.

The fiery Sindhwa, who was known to tote a gun around, soon drew the wrath of Mahavir Mahato. Two of Mahato's men, Dhanpat and Basant Paswan, died in mysterious circumstances after fights with Sindhwa. Mahato decided to liquidate Sindhwa. He enlisted the active help of Parshuram Dhanuk, another Kurmi tough from the neighbouring village of Bakra.

When, early on May 27 1977, Dhanuk and his gang attacked Sindhwa, the Harijans initially retaliated but were forced to take shelter in the house of Rohan Mahato, an old Kurmi landlord (who owned one of the

two *kuccha* dwellings in Belchhi). The rapidly-swelling horde of attackers surrounded Rohan's house, broke in, dragged Sindhwa and his men out, and fell upon them.

Versions differ as to what actually happened then. The police later said that Sindhwa and the ten other Harijans were first shot dead. Eye-witness accounts seemed to indicate that many of the victims were thrown alive on to a huge fire that had been lit in a field on the outskirts of the village. One Harijan who ran to the nearest police station at Saksohra was told that the policemen would not move out unless they were bribed. The police reached Belchhi only late that evening by a circuitous route (via Harnaut, the route Mrs. Gandhi took) and blamed their late arrival on the bad roads.

Twenty-four people were arrested, among them Mahavir Mahato, Par-

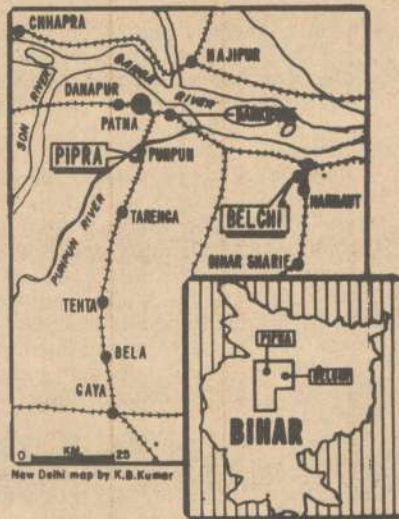
Mahavir Mahato's wife Amirka Devi (with child) and mother (gesticulating): sullen anger



shuram Dhanuk and Arun Chowdhry. Indradeo Chowdhry, one of the accused, died in December 1979; Arun Chowdhry won the Harnaut Assembly seat this year as an independent. On May 19 this year, almost exactly three years after the incident, Sessions Judge Om Prakash sentenced two of the 24 accused—Mahavir Mahato and Parshuram Dhanuk—to death. Fifteen were awarded life imprisonment and transportation. Seven were acquitted, including Arun Chowdhry and Mahavir's wife.

WHEN we travelled to Belchhi last month the roads had already been rendered near-impossible by heavy rainfall. From Patna to Barh, the subdivisional headquarter, the road is motorable. From Barh one has to branch off towards Belchhi, and this stretch is negotiable only by jeep. A few kilometres from Barh is the Ekdanga bridge, an unsafe earthen ford; Ekdanga is a Rajput village. Further down one reaches Saksohra, a small cluster of *pucca* dwellings with a muddy main street which contains the only market in the area as well as a police *thana*. At Saksohra, a small rivulet, normally dry, which one has to cross to reach the final lap to Belchhi, was already flooded. The crossing had to be made by boat.

The road from Saksohra to Belchhi was a lesson in the vicissitudes Bihar's villagers are exposed to. Atop an embankment of sorts, flanked by flooded fields, every step a menace with the sticky black mud, the trek to Belchhi past Daulatpur, a distance of about five kilometres, was exhausting. Sitting on a raised platform, called a *dih*, Belchhi seemed trapped in an afternoon languor. Janki Paswan, Sindhwa's father-in-law's brother, acted as guide. Sindhwa's widow had gone off to her sister's place in another village. Shakuntali Devi, who, like each victim's family received Rs 5,000 as compensation, bought nine *kathas*



(half a *bigha*) of poor land; this was in addition to another *bigha* that her husband left her.

No change: Nothing really had changed at Belchhi since the incident that brought it into such intense publicity. The Congress Party in 1977 set up an independent committee to enquire into the Belchhi outrage. The Janata government maintained that it was not a class-caste atrocity. In fact, Home Minister Charan Singh bluntly stated in the Lok Sabha on June 13 1977 that Belchhi did not have "caste, communal, agrarian or political overtones. Nor did it have anything to do with atrocities on the weaker sections". Singh insisted that it was a "clash between two groups of hardened criminals with long-standing rivalry". Sindhwa was even called a *murkatwa* (head-cutter), a desperado who had brought his death upon himself. For some time the controversy raged, fuelled by Mrs Gandhi's visit to Belchhi. "That woman did not even get down from her elephant," snorted Janki Paswan.

A small contingent—one havildar and six constables—of the Bihar Military Police's 10th Battalion was camping out at Belchhi. Clearly viewing their task of protecting the village's Harijans from further attack as unpleasant hardship duty, the policemen were sprawled out asleep in the portico of a half-built brick house. One wireless aerial spiking the skyline attested to Belchhi's communication with the outside world.

The only other 'benefits' Belchhi had got were a stretch of *pucca* road in front of the village (which tapered off on either side into the mud) and one hand-pump to draw water (there were three of these before the 1977 incident). All the well-water in the village was undrinkable, and the ragged electric line that fed it did not work most of the time.

"We somehow paid Rs 18,000 to the first lawyer," said Janki Paswan, "but he was a government pleader and did not do anything to help us. Later we got a better lawyer."

We were conducted to an open patch, overgrown by weeds in the middle of a maize field on the southern border of the village. This was where the eleven people had been burnt on the pyre, which was reportedly built hastily by enthusiastic Kurmi families of the village. Hardly a memorial, the site of the massacre is not cultivated by its owner, Sahadev Singh, on 'government orders'. Belchhi's children pass by this spot every day on their way to the nearest school, a kilometre away.

Rohan Mahato, a wizened little man wearing pebble-lensed glasses, was squatting in the coudung-encrusted inner quadrangle of his house. He was singularly reluctant to talk about the massacre. He refused to explain why he had offered shelter to the embattled Harijans.

'Go away': In a narrow lane running beside Mahavir Mahato's house stood his wife Amirka Devi and her old mother-in-law. The old woman was sarcastic at first and said her name was *lakhpatia* (millionaire). Amirka was sullen and tight-lipped. She was carrying a child on her hip. She had been in prison for over a year and had just been released. The child was born, said another woman, in jail (it looked older than it was reported to be). Mahato's mother was bitterly loquacious. "We are suffering the fruits of other people's evil," she said. "Eight *bighas* of my son's land have already been sold to pay his lawyer. We will sell all our land if it means saving him. After all he was our only breadwinner. What do we have to eat these days? Nothing! The *bataidars* (sharecroppers) take half the crop from us as wages." The old woman was certain that her son had not killed anyone. "*Kisi aur ne kiya tha*," she said. "Why

The uncultivated patch where Belchhi victims were burnt to death



do you come here to plague us with questions?" said Amirka. "Go away. Why do you come here after injustice has been done to my husband?"

Although for Belchhi's Harijans the trial had been an inconvenience—they had to travel to Barh, 14 km away, under police escort and thence to Patna to testify in the witness-box—they were clearly happy at the punishment meted out to the Kurmis.

The policemen offered us water and sugar candy as we were leaving. Back at Saksohra, where the jeep was parked, people clustered around, wanting to know if the photographer was from the *sarkar* (government), come to put up a bridge across the troublesome rivulet. On being told the purpose of the expedition, they turned away disappointed. "What is the point in going to Belchhi?" they said. "Let the policemen depart, there will be violence again."

PIPRA was a far more recent atrocity: it occurred on the night of February 25 this year. Like Belchhi, Pipra is situated on a raised *dih*. Towards the east is the main village, which has a population of about 400, consisting of some Muslims, and mostly Kurmis, Pasis, and a few Harijans. To the west is a separate cluster of huts, the *chamartoli*, where the members of the cobbler caste live in 27 families.

Briefly, what happened at Pipra was this: late in the night on February 25, a large gang of attackers descended on the *chamartoli*. The *chamars* had expected some sort of attack and had mounted a watch. Nevertheless, nine members of one family were killed. Four more Harijans fell victim to the armed attackers; one more died later in hospital. The marauders set fire to the entire *chamartoli*. By this time, most of the Harijans had taken shelter in a half-built brick structure belonging to Kapil Dev. From there, they bombarded the attackers with

A Pipra widow



Devlal Ravidas: abused for his eagerness to talk

bricks and stones. In this way the attack was repulsed, but not before the dead Harijans had been tossed into the flame-engulfed houses.

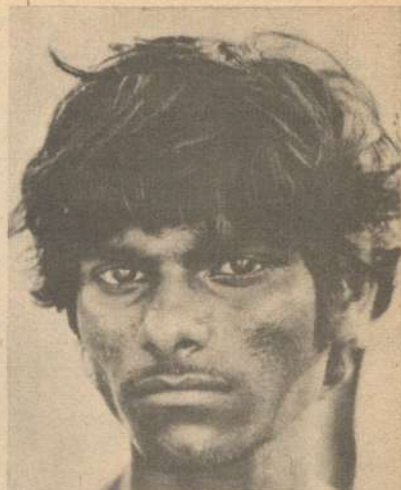
About 20 km from Patna runs the Poonpoo river. There is a railway line running across it, heading towards Gaya. Incredibly overcrowded passenger trains, with people clinging onto the rooftops and the engine's fender, regularly ply people to and from Patna. Yet another precarious earthen bridge fords the river and enters Poonpoo town. The main street of Poonpoo has to be seen to be believed. Bordered by shops selling a large variety of goods, it is nothing but an ugly ribbon of cloying mud, deeply rutted by tractor tyres. Beyond the Poonpoo railway station the road is impossible to drive or walk over.

Walkathon: We clambered on to the railway embankment and started out on the long walk to Pipra. Ten kilometres from Poonpoo, there is no definable road to Pipra. One has to walk for two hours alongside flooded paddy and maize fields, passing two villages, Dhumri and Chandwar, before one comes within sight of Pipra.

The *chamars* of Pipra were understandably still smarting under the memory of the attack. One suspicious individual not only refused to talk but accused us of being police informers.

Sixty-two people have been arrested in connection with the Pipra outrage and the case is proceeding in Patna. Here, too, witnesses summoned by the court have to be escorted by three rifle-bearing constables and a sub-inspector all the way from Pipra to Poonpoo, whence they are taken by jeep to Patna. It is a long and laborious process, and the escorting policemen do not relish it.

Two clusters of tents on either side of the Pipra *chamartoli* signalled the presence of 16 men of the Bihar Military Police. Walking through the fire-blackened shells of the houses, we



Mantu Ravidas: Pipra's angry young man

were followed by inquisitive but suspicious villagers.

Kurmi and Yadav landlords from neighbouring villages had usurped 24 acres of 'public' land adjacent to the *chamartoli*.

The Poonpoo area has witnessed increasing Naxalite activity in the recent past; it also encompasses some of the most heartless and blatant exploitation of the landless Harijans in Patna district. The Pipra Harijans had been reduced to working as either sharecroppers or as labourers in food-for-work projects the government regularly sponsored in the area.

The build-up: At Pipra the pressures had been building up for a long time. One of the big landlords of the area was Bhola Singh from village Kalyanchak, a kilometre from Pipra. Bhola was alleged to have usurped five *bighas* of land belonging to Pipra's Shivnarain Ravidas. His brother Sudheshwar was another feared landlord. A cousin of Bhola's, Radhika Singh, took as mistress a young woman called Taramani from Pipra. Taramani's "sell-out" served to increase the anger and resentment nursed by her community against the rich kulaks. Today, Pipra's Harijans maintain that Taramani is a prime defence witness, a stooge of the Kurmis.

The master-serf relationship between the Kurmi landlords and the Harijans of the Pipra region had steadily worsened the inter-caste situation. Added to their economic power, the landlords also enjoyed unbridled political influence. In this situation, organising the Harijans to strike back at their oppressors was easy. In the last few years, 28 Kurmi landlords in the Pipra area were killed in the lightning attacks. The police immediately attributed the murders to the Naxalites. Not only were the landlords killed—in most cases their heads were cut off and carried away. The landlords formed a Kisan Surak-



Bored policemen at the Belchhi outpost

sha Samiti in order to 'defend' themselves. Bhola Singh was its president. In December 1979, Bhola Singh was killed by three assailants in a field barely one kilometre from his village. Immediately, the landlords of the area met and decided that the attackers had come from the Pipra *chamartoli*. Although Bhola's brother Sudheshwar tried to persuade them that they had come from another direction, the decision to wipe out Pipra's Harijans was taken. It was thus that the Pipra outrage occurred.

At Pipra, a garrulous Harijan called Devlal Ravidas offered to talk. He described the killing of Bhola Singh and said that the landlords had made up their minds that Pipra was a Naxalite den. After Bhola's death most of the Pipra labourers were sacked by their masters. Another young Harijan, Mantu Ravidas, interrupted to say fiercely, "If we had guns, as they allege we have, would we not have driven away our attackers? Our only weapons were bricks and rocks. These days there is no work for us in those Kurmis' fields. We have to work on the government's food-for-work programme. We are supposed to receive ten kilograms of wheat for every 100 cubic feet of earth we cut and transport. Everyone takes a cut from this—the contractor, the Poonpoo Block Development Officer—everyone! The landlords, are slowly squeezing the blood out of us."

Ram Ekbal Tiwari, an assistant sub-inspector, who headed the police contingent at Pipra, had his own theory. "Dozens of landlords have been killed in this area by the Naxalites," he said. "When people could no longer bear the problems they set fire to the *chamartoli*." Somewhat facetiously, Tiwari said that the Harijans were supposed to own many guns. Had he searched their houses? No, he said. "These people say they are feeling threatened," he went on.

"Would they move out of their *toli* if they were? Would they visit the Poonpoo bazar? Would they wander around in all four directions?" Tiwari told us that the Naxalites held meetings in Kapil Dev's house in the centre of the *toli*. "We will remain as long as the government keeps us posted here," he said cheerfully, relaxing on a cot in his tent. "But when we go away there will be more violence."

Great hostility: Tiwari's attitude speaks a lot for the almost insurmountable suspicion and hostility the Harijans face from the landlords, the police, and the administrators. The Naxalites may perhaps have tried to mobilise the Harijans, but the retribution it has brought upon them is terrible. Ugly confrontations regularly break out over the Harijans' demands for the right of passage through a landlord's fields, or over their anger at the callous way in which their women are treated by the landlords. Paid extremely poor wages, made to work for long hours, beaten up often, their meagre land usurped, the Harijans feel increasingly cornered. Every time there is a theft of copper wire from the electric line passing through the area a Harijan is promptly blamed for it. Another story vividly illustrates the widening chasm between the kulaks and the Harijans.

A *chamar* boy from Pipra, Jawahar Ravidas, determined to better his lot, enrolled in the nearby school at Dhumri. Jawahar was a bright student and soon overtook classmates belonging to 'higher' castes. The schoolteacher, a Kurmi, was already a bitter man because his son had turned out to be a dullard and was fit only to till the fields. One day the schoolteacher noticed Jawahar wearing a watch. Unable to tolerate this audacity on the part of the Harijan boy, the schoolteacher brutally beat Jawahar up. So badly was Jawahar injured that he lost

his sanity. Today he is in the Kanke mental hospital in Ranchi, and his old parents have lost the only person who could have looked after them.

Five months after the Pipra killings nothing much has happened here either. Perhaps, a few years from now, some Kurmis may be found guilty of the murders and awarded death sentences. But that will not alter the situation in the Poonpoo-Dhanarua-Masaurhi-Naubatpur belt, where increasing economic and social pressure from the landlord classes has led to a growing militancy among the Harijans. All that has happened at Pipra, for instance, after the massacre is that the *chamars* have been given loans to build *pucca* houses. Even these were half-built and the Harijans complained that they were not getting sufficient money.

Devious politicians: Whether it is Belchhi or Pipra, tensions between the landlords and the sharecroppers are checked only by bored police pickets. Nothing has been done to alleviate the problems of the Harijans. More depressing is the deviousness of politicians who exploit atrocities committed against the Harijans. Indira Gandhi made a lot of political capital out of her Belchhi visit. Had she visited every site of anti-Harijan violence during her last tenure as prime minister? Soon after Belchhi, did she visit Kanjhwala, only 35 km from Delhi, where the Harijans who had been awarded cattle-grazing land were being opposed violently by the landlords? Soon after Mrs Gandhi returned to power in January this year four anti-Harijan atrocities occurred in quick succession—at Parasbigha, Dohia and Pipra in Bihar and at Narainpur in Uttar Pradesh. Did Mrs Gandhi tour those areas? Even had she done so, little would have happened aside from donations of a few blankets and saris.

Increasingly, class-caste confrontations in Bihar are acquiring ugly contours. "Every attempt by the weaker sections to improve their lot is visited by such ferocity that any person not conversant with the caste-class situation in Bihar would be perplexed by the violence," says a discerning government official in Ranchi. "At no place in the formal power structure can the Harijans go for help. Everyone—the district police, the district administrators, the MLAs and the landlords themselves—seems to be part of a sinister conspiracy. For instance, the Patna High Court has awarded no less than 10,000 stay orders restraining transfer of surplus land to the *bataidars*. Bihar's courts are the most reactionary in the country today." Belchhi and Pipra are but signposts on the dangerous road to an explosion that will one day tear asunder the patchily darned social fabric of this sensitive region.