

# Massacres by landlord militia rock India's second most populous state

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Twelve villagers, four of them women and one a 12-year-old child, were massacred by a landlord-sponsored militia in the Jahanabad District of India's Bihar state on the evening of February 11.

The massacre was the second in less than a month mounted by the Ranbir Sena (Ranbir's Army) in Jahanabad. On the evening of January 25 the Ranbir Sena invaded the village of Shankarbigha, killing 22 men, women and children. In both massacres the victims were agricultural labourers and their families, all of them Dalits. (Dalit, which literally means "the oppressed," is the term now commonly used to refer to India's former untouchables, who, despite the legal abolition of Untouchability a half-century ago, continue to be the target of systematic discrimination and comprise a highly disproportionate percentage of India's illiterate, landless and jobless population.)

Over the past decade Bihar's central districts have regularly been convulsed by landlord violence. In December 1997, 61 persons were killed in a Ranbir Sena massacre in a village only a short distance from Shankarbigha.

The Ranbir Sena has publicly taken responsibility for the latest massacres and named other villages that it says will be targeted unless the agricultural workers cease their agitation for better pay and land and repudiate the Naxhalites. Maoist armed-activists, the Naxhalites have gained a following in parts of Bihar by assisting agricultural workers in organising and defending themselves from landlord violence. *Frontline* magazine reports, however, that the local Naxalite organization disclaims mounting any agitation in at least one of the two villages recently victimised by the Ranbir Sena, Shankarbigha.

The Ranbir Sena was formed in 1994 to answer the new assertiveness of the agricultural labourers with

more effective repression, through the creation of a professional militia with better training, weaponry and leadership. The landlords use money--the militia's members are well-paid and provided with life insurance--and caste prejudices (the name Ranbir refers to a hero of the Bhumihar caste) to mobilise poor youths from the traditional upper castes against the Dalits. Although the militia is officially banned, it operates with veritable impunity in central Bihar. None of its organisers have been arrested, let alone jailed. The government's only response to the repeated massacres has been to offer financial compensation packages of at most a few thousand dollars to the injured and relatives of the dead.

Clearly, the Ranbir Sena enjoys the protection of much of Bihar's political elite. Moreover, this support cuts across party lines. The Naxalites responded to the Shankarbigha massacre by murdering a local leader of the Communist Party of India, who was reputedly in cahoots with the Ranbir Sena, and his son. When Laloo Prasad Yadav, the president of Bihar's now deposed ruling party (the Rashtriya Janata Dal) and his wife, then Bihar's chief minister, visited Narayanpur, the site of the latest massacre, they were denounced by villagers for failing to protect them. Yadav has since accused India's ruling coalition, led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, of orchestrating the massacres to provide a pretext for the dismissal of Bihar's RJD government. "They are killing our people and also holding us responsible," declared Yadav, who, despite his government's manifest failure to check the landlord violence, poses as a defender of the Dalits.

The violence in the Bihar's central districts is rooted in poverty and social inequality that are among the worst in India, and indeed the world. Although rich in minerals and an early centre of industry, according to

most indicators Bihar is India's poorest state. Approximately two-thirds of the rural population are considered to be living in poverty. Yet in 1986-87 less than 2 percent of Bihar's rural population were receiving subsidised food from the state, as opposed to an Indian average of 26.8 percent. Just over half the males and less than a quarter of females in Bihar are literate. In rural Bihar just 5.6 percent of households had electricity in 1991 and there were only 31 hospital beds per million people.

As elsewhere in India, Congress state governments introduced various land reforms in the decades following the end of British rule. Although the *zamindari* (feudal-type) estates were broken up, the landlords have used various loopholes to maintain much of the land within their extended families. Even more importantly, land reform resulted in little land being made available to the landless and those living on marginal holdings. The large landlords and a new class of rich peasants have also been able to use their financial and political power to monopolise most of the state assistance for agriculture.

The Naxhalite movement takes its name from the Naxalbari area of West Bengal where dissident CPI (M) members launched an armed uprising in the 1960s, with the hope of fomenting a mass peasant rebellion. Ultimately, the supporters of "people's war" broke with the CPI (M), founding the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969. In the ensuing three decades, the Naxhalites have split many times, giving rise to a myriad of groups and grouplets, a handful of which are waging small-scale guerrilla movements in particularly impoverished pockets of India. Others, including the CPI (M-L), have transformed themselves into legal parties.

All, however, share the same Maoist-Stalinist perspective. Defining India as essentially a feudal society, they stand for a "New Democratic Revolution" based on a "bloc of four classes," which includes the so-called national-revolutionary section of the bourgeoisie.

Nationalist in outlook and hostile to the working class, the Naxhalites are oriented, whether waging armed struggle or electoral politics, towards manoeuvres and alliances with various sections of the ruling class.

The CPI (M-L) supported Laloo Prasad Yadav's RJD in the 1998 Indian election, claiming this corrupt, caste-

based, capitalist party was a bulwark of secularism against the communal BJP. Those Naxhalite groups, such as the CPI (M-L) People's War that remain true to the perspective of seizing power in isolated rural areas--and making peasant communes the base for a protracted guerrilla war that ultimately will bring "revolution" from the countryside to the cities--have invariably been driven by the exigencies of such activity to strike deals with the local political bosses, engage in contraband and other illicit activities, and to promote caste-ism.

In the late 1960s and 1970s thousands of revolutionary-minded youths lost their lives trying to implement the Naxhalite perspective. Because of the appalling poverty and inequality prevailing in much of India and because the working class has been subordinated by the Stalinist parties to capitalist politics--to trade union struggles and parliamentarism--the Naxhalites have, on occasion since, been able to evoke limited popular support in a number of peasant and agricultural labourer struggles.

With their peasant-based guerrillaism the Naxhalites supplement the work of the mainline Stalinist parties in keeping the working class--which by virtue of its ties to modern industry, technique and the global economy is the most essential revolutionary force in India--isolated from the struggles of the rural masses. Predictably, the Naxhalites' sole response to the massacres of the Ranbir Sena has been to mount and threaten retaliatory raids, publicising their own hit-list of landlords and their accomplices.

A half-century of "independent India" has proven the utter incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to complete the tasks of the democratic revolution and the bankruptcy of the Stalinist-Maoist two-stage theory of revolution. The eradication of caste and landlord oppression will be achieved only as a by-product of the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government, i.e., in conjunction with and as part of the struggle for world socialism.



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