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Private armies ruling the roost

The recent killing of 24 Dalits in Jehanabad district proves the apprehension that state rule is withering away in Bihar, says Irfan Ahmad

The cold-blooded massacre of 24 Dalits, including seven children and four women, by the outlawed Ranvir Sena, a private army of Bhumihar landlords, on the eve of Republic Day at Shankarbigha village of Jehanabad district in Bihar though shocking is not a surprising event. In conflict-ridden Bihar today such killings are almost a regular occurrence. Only when the magnitude is too large it hits the headlines of the national dailies.

This is the third major strike by the Ranvir Sena, in the past three years, the most heinous being the Lakshmanpur Bathe massacre of 1997 in which 61 Dalits were killed. The BJP-Samta Party combine has asked for the dismissal of the Rabri Devi Government. State BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi has even advised President KR Narayanan to act immediately and impose Central rule in Bihar.

Such advice is not only politically motivated, it also betrays the crying socio-economic reality in the rural Bihar which has virtually become a battleground for the dispossessed and the near-disintegrating lot of feudal lords. For the landless, it is a battle for existence and social dignity. For the Savarna and the landed it is an attempt to retain their century-old dominance.

Distribution of land has been a contentious issue for decades. There are about 100 zamindars in the State today

who own more than 500 acres of land and about 600 zamindars who own more than 100 acres. Till very recently, the mahant of Bodh Gaya owned 40,000 acres of land, even after donating 11,110 acres to Vinoba Bhave during the *bhoodan aandolan*.

Ironically, Bihar was the first State to enact the Land Reforms Act, in 1950. This wide gulf between the landless and land-owning upper castes apart, the former are made to accept the lowest wages. Of the total rural population in Bihar, around 40 per cent are landless and about 20 per cent poor peasants. They are forced to work for longer duration but when it comes to the payment of wages all the legal directives are flouted with impunity.

Along with the inequality of land distribution and low wage is the cruelty of medieval-type social oppression. Swami Sahjanand, the prominent peasant leader in the pre-Independence Bihar, has written: "In one village, farmers were supposed to provide the zamindars with one litre of milk per household. One day when they ran short, the zamindar flew into a rage and demanded that they made up the deficit from their lactating women."

That was in 1930s. Similar conditions prevail even today, only the form has changed. In 1994, in Siwan

district, a Harijan child was severely punished for not greeting a Rajput landlord with folded hands. Only a few years ago, in Madhubani, a lower caste woman was mercilessly beaten up for drawing water from a well used by the upper castes. The whole of central Bihar today witnesses such inhuman instances in one way or the other.

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ry of peasant uprising, beginning with the Ho rebellion (1820-21) against money-lenders, zamindars and the British rule, the recent conflict can be traced back to the late 1960s when Naxalism entered the State. Its onset marked a radical shift as armed struggle was adopted as a policy by the movement, irrespective of the actual differences among its various contending groups. Using the loopholes in the Land Reforms Act (1950), most of the landlords had managed to retain their land. In some cases wherein land was officially given to the actual tillers, they were not allowed to cultivate it. This ever-increasing frustration of the deprived class found violent expression as the Naxalities came on the scene.

This logically united the upper caste landlords who formed their own outfits to counter the 'menace' of Naxalism. Many private armies sprang up in central and south Bihar — Diamond Sena, Sunlight Sena, Lorik Sena, Kishan Sangh and Ranvir Sena. Of these, the latter two bear special mention. Though not in the news now, the Kisan Sangh was quite influential during 1991-92. It was formed in October 1990 in rural Patna. On November 17, its activists killed four landless Dalits in Daryapur. On February 19, 1991, it again killed 14 Dalits. In November 1991, yet again four

Dalits were shot dead by its activists.

The Ranvir Sena is of recent origin. It was founded in 1993 by the upper caste landlords, mainly the Bhumihars. It hit the headlines when it massacred 23 people at Bathani Tola (Bhojpur) in July 1996. Only a year ago it held an open public meeting where, invoking the historic pride and heroism of Bhumihars, it resolved to remove Naxalism from the face of Bihar. The recent carnage by the Ranvir Sena is in accordance with its declaration, issued immediately after the demise of CPI-ML (Liberation) leader Vinod Mishra, to silence the peasant revolt once and for all.

The battlelines are clearly drawn between the private senas of the upper castes and the landless peasants under the banner of Liberation and other Naxalite streams, the law-enforcing agencies at best remain a mute spectator. If the several reports are to be believed, both the district police and authorities in Patna were aware of the impending attack. Yet, no preventive action was taken.

For a healthy society nothing could be more disastrous than the criminal silence of the police which could have easily averted the massacre. Observers describe the present situation in Bihar as "withering away of the state". It sounds convincing. But it could be otherwise also: that the private senas have overtaken the state?

