

Life In Dacoit Land

The Punjabi farmers migrated to Madhya Pradesh in 1947. They cleared forests and cultivated the land—all the time having to contend with dacoits.

by M. S. GILL

IN recent weeks a great deal has been written in the press on the surrender of dacoits in the northern districts of Madhya Pradesh. A tendency to glamorise the occasion and the act has also been noticeable. This has tended to put a gloss on the ruthlessness of these men and the terror they inspire in the districts of Bhind, Morena and Shivpuri. No one has bothered to find out or write about the occasional examples of courage shown by the people.

Take one such example. Landless peasants from districts like Amritsar have gone to these regions over the decades in search of a place in the sun. Even before Independence, Punjabi peasants had bought lands in Bhind and Morena and devoted their energies to turning these arid lands into Mini Punjab.

Those who write today in adulatory tones of Madho Singh and others would, I am sure, not like to meet this gentleman on a dark night in a forest lane! But these Punjabi peasants have lived with the menace of these dacoits. Schooled in adversity, they have always treated this as one more obstacle to be faced and overcome.

After 1947, more people went to Madhya Pradesh in search of land and today there must be some thousands of them spread over these three districts. They cut down and cleared forests—something no one thought possible to accomplish. They managed somehow to take water from tanks and streams to lands that had been dry for centuries. They introduced the sowing of rice, growing of fodder crops and a host of agricultural improvements, acting as "extension workers" in the true sense.

Shivpuri is today a rice market of considerable importance, though 15 years ago no one had heard of the crop. All this the people have done while living in the shadow of the dacoits' guns. Living out in the open forests, they had no protection against kidnapping or robbery except their own courage.

Do Your Worst!

There is no doubt that a few collaborated with the dacoits by selling guns, occasionally even joining the gangs. But the majority of the Punjabi peasants were there to earn an honest living by making two blades of grass grow where one grew before. The dacoits recognised that these were poor peasants in constant conflict with the elements and so not worth kidnapping. They were also perhaps aware that, if challenged, the Punjabi would not take things lying



—P. Dayal

GULAB SINGH, who surrendered to "J. P." recently along with 413 others. Those who didn't surrender continue to terrorise farmers and villagers in the Bhind and Morena districts of Madhya Pradesh. But the Punjabi farmers in the area recently refused to be blackmailed into paying ransom for three of their kidnapped men.

down. By and large, therefore, they followed a policy of "Live and Let Live".

Recently however this policy of the majority of the gangs appears to have been challenged and ignored by the gang of dacoit Kalyan Singh. A couple of months before the surrender dialogue started, Kalyan Singh and his men raided a Punjabi farm about 30 miles from Shivpuri. As usual they came dressed as Policemen or Forest Guards. One young man, who came out to answer their call, was caught by them. With sheer strength he pushed off the men holding him and ran away into the dark night. The dacoits managed to catch three other men and took them away. The kidnapping made the Punjabis restless, as they visualised that more was to come.

Gwalior is central to the three districts of Shivpuri, Bhind and Morena. It is also a focus of Punjabi community life, being the biggest commercial centre in the area and a place of pilgrimage for Sikhs. (Guru Hargobind, the Sixth Guru, was imprisoned in the

historic Gwalior Fort by Emperor Jahan-gir.) A social worker from Tarn Taran is raising a memorial *gurdwara* in the fort to Guru Hargobind.

Sant Uttam Singh is typical of the Punjab and its men. Asked how much the proposed *gurdwara* would cost, he replied: "About 18 lakhs." As to where this vast sum would come from, he said, hopefully: "From the *Sangat*!" Uttam Singh continues to build the *gurdwara* and somehow the money and the labour is always available!

In times of need, people look for a leader. The relatives of the kidnappers went to the Sant. His answer was simple: "If you want my help, then you must do exactly as I say, even if it hurts you."

Nothing Doing!

The relatives agreed. The Sant insisted that, no matter what happened, the ransom would not be paid. One payment would lead to another kidnapping and ransom—so the relatives should consider the kidnapped men dead. The relatives accepted this. The Sant then invited representatives to a meeting called at the Gwalior *gurdwara*.

On the appointed day, a big *diwan* was held. Four to five thousand people attended. Fiery speeches were made. It was emphatically stated that ransom would not be paid. And the menace would be fought.

Everyone knew that the message would get to the dacoits, who have their informers all over. The resolution was unanimously adopted. A procession then marched in vocal protest to the local administration. Uttam Singh led a deputation which demanded that the Police act vigorously to bring back the kidnapped men. He said bluntly that, if the Government authorities could not do anything, then they would have to do something on their own. Amused officials asked what they proposed to do? Pat came the reply: "These dacoits have kidnapped our people. We know where their relatives and children live. If you won't do anything in the matter, then we will get hold of these relatives. Whenever they release one of our men, we will release one of theirs."

Now, how could the dacoits feel the pinch if they were allowed to continue to operate while their relatives lived free and unafraid? Action was promised by the Government authorities.

Within a couple of weeks, the men were released unconditionally and without payment of any ransom. When they came back, they related an amusing story. Reports of the gathering at the *gurdwara* and all other action taken by the Punjabis had reached the dacoits. In the evenings they often jocularly told their captives of what was happening in the *gurdwara*. On the day of release, the dacoits tried to frighten them. They were told to go and have a bath in the stream as they were likely to be sent to heaven!

The men calmly bathed, said their prayers and prepared themselves for whatever was to come. The dacoits then suddenly informed them that they were free to go! The dacoits pleaded that they had spent a couple of thousand rupees on organising their kidnapping. At least these expenses should be paid!