



A lone policeman on guard at Jagrampur

# PEACE IN THE CHAMBAL

*In India's wild west, the guns are falling silent. The socio-economic conditions have improved and the police are better equipped. Today, a lawless past is giving way to a peaceful future*

**T**he evil of the dacoits is on the wane, and romance has fallen on evil days in the dark ravines of the Chambal. Gone are the terrifying yet fascinating figures that dominated parts of UP, MP, and Rajasthan with their reign of terror. Malkhan Singh, Madho Singh, Phoolan Devi—the Chambal's children of notoriety have surrendered and gone. And a journalist on the lookout for stories about new dacoit gangs has to search and scour to find one.

All that the present can boast of is the petty presence of a backward caste dacoit, Vidya Ram Gararia (32), code-named D-1 by the police, with a Rs 10,000 reward hanging over his head. The only other contender for the kingdom of the ravines was Raghuraj Singh Sikarwar, a Thakur operating in Morena. He and two of his associates were recently shot dead by the police. The rest of his gang has absconded and are supposed to have intimated a desire to surrender.

Even between these last two representatives of a violent tradition, there was a considerable difference in style. While Raghu looted and murdered his victims, Vidya followed the quieter and more insidious method of kidnapping for ransom. His last crime was committed six months ago when he got Rs 40,000 for a *pakar* (kidnapping) before going into hiding.

Vidya Ram does not have the daredevilry of the more flamboyant figures of the past. He avoids encounters with the police to keep them off his trail, and his crimes are few and far between. His gang, not numbering more than four or five, has been operating for the last three and a half years. A touch of romance is provided by the presence of one member, a Gujar woman called Munni. Vidya had rescued her from being sold off by her paramour in the jungles of Paharagarh, part of the Kailaras police station area. (Selling wives and mistresses is a common practice among

the Gujars.) In the ransom game, Vidya's hostages are usually children or weak persons, and his demands range from Rs 40,000 to Rs 60,000. The victims are almost always villagers who go into uninhabited areas, sometimes children, whose grazing cattle have strayed into the wilderness. As Asif Ibrahim, SP, Gwalior Range, explained, "Capturing a villager means you don't let too many people know. It would seem unusual for a townsman to go to a

godforsaken place to pay up the ransom. But a villager can go into the ravines without attracting attention." Kidnapping has now become their favoured sport; it brings in ready cash and there is no need to find a fence to dispose of stolen property or jewellery.

Vidya's entry into crime has the feudal rationale so typical of this area—he wanted to avenge a common Gararia insult stemming from an altercation over grazing territories. The Gararias, a

Ready for action: Sunder Pal Singh, a farmer in Morena



backward caste, are marginal farmers and cattle owners. Vidya himself owns about 20 bighas across a rivulet near his village Jagrampura in the Uttila police station area of Gwalior district. On 29 March, 1984, he had an altercation over grazing rights with another villager, Dataram, and his son. Once a case had been registered against both contenders, Vidya moved out of his own village and went into hiding. On 25 September, together with his brother and a couple of others, Vidya broke into Dataram's house, stole his 12-bore gun and cartridges, and shot father and son dead. The gang has been at large ever since, terrorising the neighbourhood. "He (Vidya) was illiterate and took to stealing cattle from an early age," said Lakha Ram, an old man who owns the house next to Vidya's. Jagrampura is still under a pall of fear, despite the police guards in the village. Most of the villagers have sold off their cattle, and never go near Vidya's land. "As long as he is farar (absconding)," commented Dataram's other son Karan Singh, "we cannot be sure what he will do. And he keeps



An accomplice of Madho Singh

saying he has not yet had his revenge on us."

Raghuraj Singh Sikarwar may have come from a more elevated caste than Vidya, but he too ended up as a fugitive on the run, until he was shot dead in March 1987. A resident of Pachleka village, he began with petty crimes. The first offence for which he was convicted, was the theft of chillies from a shop in 1979. But his first serious crime was the rape and murder of a 12-year old girl, Mathura, for which he was sentenced to life in 1980, but was eventually released on bail. In 1982, he committed two more murders, that of a Dhakar called Dataram, and of a 16-year old Sikarwar girl Laxmi, who happened to be the sister of an enemy. Two other murders were added to the list before he was caught, sentenced for 70 years, and imprisoned in Gwalior Central Jail in 1982.

In August 1985, however, Raghuraj managed to escape. Twenty-four crimes, including 10 murders, followed. The most gruesome incident was a series of five murders in one day. He began by killing three rawats (backwards) in Mewara village, part of Manpur police station. On being pursued, he turned and killed two other people at a place called Nandapura on the same day. Not that Raghuraj was always the lone operator. His gang of six or seven members included his brother Surendra and his uncle, Virendra. They operated mostly in the Maratha gutas of Pahargarh, Chinoni and Devgarh, as well as along the ravines of the Kuari River. The fatal shootout with the police occurred on the night of 5 March. The astonishing thing about the man who came down a bloody path to such a bloody end was that he was not driven to crime by want. On the contrary, he happened to come from a family of landowners. Between them, his father, his uncle and Raghuraj himself owned 200 bighas of land worth Rs 16 lakhs.

The mystique of the Chambal has

grown over the years with a gradual accretion of legend, folklore and the presence of a fierce breed of men who embraced medieval codes of conduct, tolerated no insults, and preferred to take law and justice into their own hands. At one time, the police were hopelessly outnumbered by the armies of dacoits who roamed the Valley. Many of them came from the Thakur caste, though some did belong to the backward classes. But whatever their origins, a fierce pride was common to them all. They preferred to settle scores personally, and the Chambal Valley acted both as their shelter as well as their court of justice.

The collector of Morena, Arvind Joshi, tried to explain how the natives perceived the advantages of dacoity, given their ingrained system of values and their feudal social structures. Similarities with the Sicilian Mafia are obvious. "The actual rural life of the area" he said, "is a simple picture of balance of terror between the various communities. Once a dacoit gang is

Police superintendent Surinder Singh



formed, the caste to which it belongs gets a tremendous amount of social protection. And because of...the growing wealth and rising prices of land (in the villages) a dacoit gang belonging to one's zone, community or caste gives one a feeling of power, an edge over the other people in the village. All small disputes get settled, perforce, in favour



of the 'protected' group. (In return) the caste also nurses the dacoits."

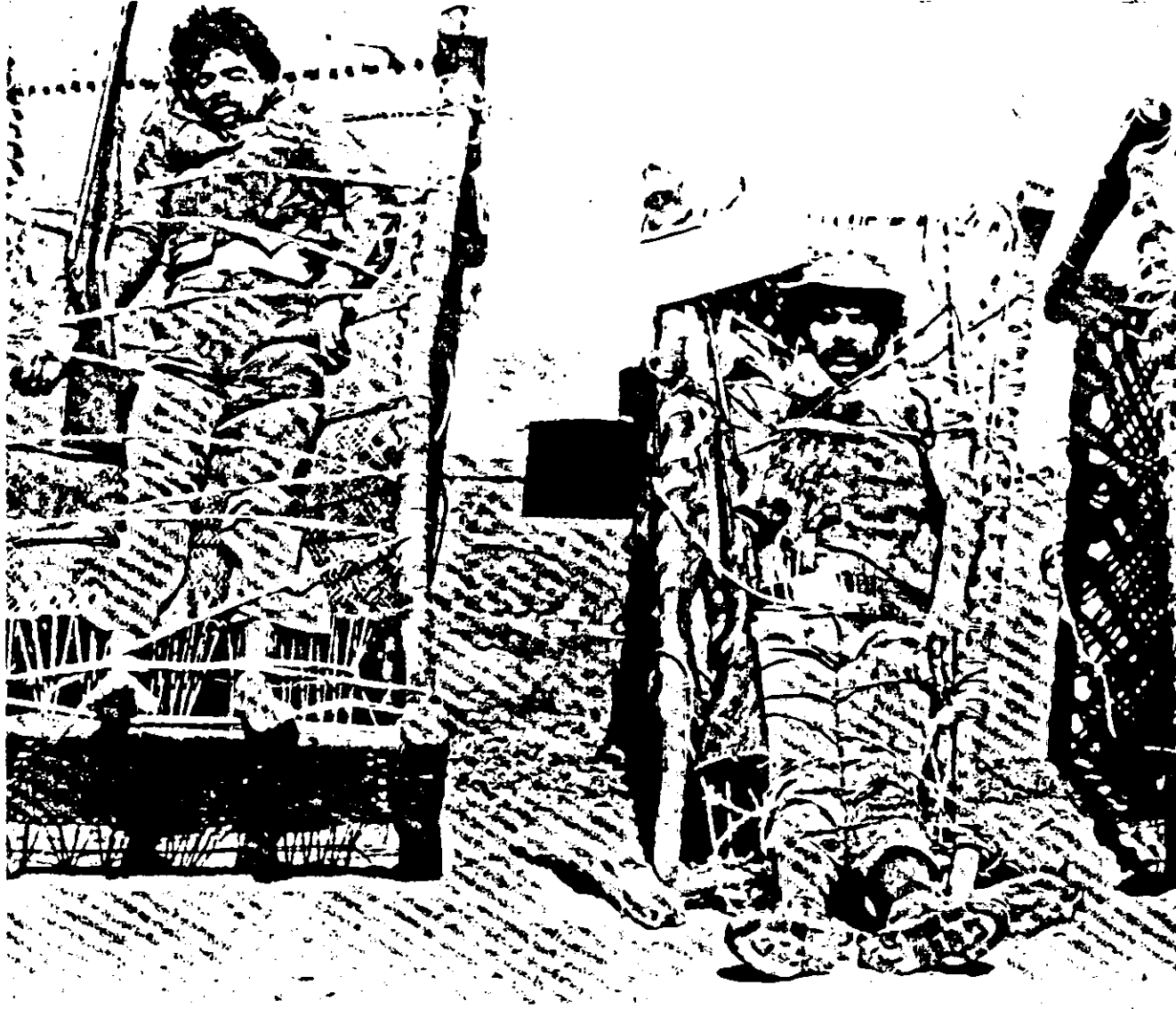
This was the background for the emergence of the legendary names—Malkhan Singh, Madho Singh, Baba Ghanshyam, and the spectacular figure of all, Phoolan Devi. But even the longest reign of terror has to end sometime, and a changing set of socio-economic circumstances combined with the growth and efficiency of the police saw the surrender of most of these dacoits and their gangs. Mohar and Madho Singh surrendered in 1972. This was followed by the major exodus in 1983 when Malkhan Singh, Phoolan Devi and Ghanshyam also surrendered.

Finally, the Chambal Valley has become victim—or a beneficiary—of the modern age. Not that crime has ceased to be a way of life, but that criminals are



harder to come by. The stakes are different now. As Mr Joshi argued, "there was a time when if I had 10 *bighas* of land, I would hardly make Rs 500 to Rs 1,000 a year. If I had to leave the land and go into the ravines, I wouldn't be losing much. But today I know that each season I would be losing Rs 2,000 a *bigha* for the rabi crop, and Rs 1,000 a *bigha* for the kharif crop. That is Rs 3,000 a *bigha* if I double-crop every year." Besides, agriculture also keeps people busy. "Intensive agriculture," explained Mr Joshi, "means that you develop different values—you start thinking of becoming a member of a cooperative society, going to the *mandi* to sell your things, having greater liaison with traders, maybe borrowing and depositing money, looking for fertilisers and better seeds. So your attitude and

(Top): Yesterday's dacoit, today's farmer; and (bottom): The ones that didn't get away: three dacoits killed in an 'encounter' with the



occupation changes. Now, there is a greater demand for education. People come to me with demands for schools. This was not so earlier."

Agriculture, however, can never provide total employment—at the most it amounts to about 200 days of employment every year, and that too for the backward castes. And even they have a very hard time either envisioning or accepting alternative modes of employment, even when they are in distress. According to the collector, "Caste values are so strong, that a Thakur or a Brahmin will not even work in the fields." Naturally, robbery and looting were preferred as alternative modes of earning a living. And even today, when one can see some of the higher caste people as farmers, help or charity is still anathema to their proud souls. Particu-

police



larly if it is given equally to the lower castes. In 1986 for instance, when 35 villages were devastated by a hailstorm, the government organised relief in the shape of public works to the value of Rs 40-50 lakhs. But the Thakurs, though penniless, would not work there with everybody else.

It was this false sense of pride that often precipitated irrevocable actions which drove the upper castes of Chambal to crime. As for the backward caste men-turned dacoits, many of them would never have become criminals if justice had been ensured for them. Jagdish Sharma, himself an upper caste person, was one of Madho Singh's men who had surrendered. "There are no dacoits in the Chambal," he said, "there never were any. If you ensured that they all got justice, they would never have turned into outlaws. The only *dakos* are the men in white we see so often."

Now a visitor, can see how the forces of change have given the Chambal Valley quite a face-lift. The land is greener and more level. Instead of the chilling roar of guns, the sound of the Chambal is a combination of sputtering tractors, humming market-places, and yelling children. The police have established control in a big way. Gone are the days when a police officer like Raghuraj Singh Bhadoria had to defend his *thana* with a tiny force as a mob of rampaging dacoits mounted an attack.

Police vigilance and effectiveness has increased significantly. Morena, for instance, is one of the largest districts in the anti-dacoity operations zone. Of the 28,000 firearms licensed in the district, only about 15,000 are for the protection of crops from animals. This works out to one licensed gun for every 50 persons. "To combat this," said the S.P. Morena, "we have 14,000 guns...and 60 vehicles." He also said that the police had a very good wireless system which helped them comb the Valley even though some police stations were rather inaccessible, particularly during the monsoons. Whatever dacoits were left after the passing of the stalwarts, became more cautious, and learned to treat the police with reluctant respect. As Asif Ibrahim pointed out, "They have discovered that provisioning is very difficult when you have a force of over 20 men. You need rations, and also the personality to settle disputes within the gang at one stroke." The improvement in the police network as well as in the supply of arms, have also given the dacoits cause for alarm. "They don't get into encounters in the open. If they see you in the jungle, they just run." Inglorious, though lawful end

for one of the most feared and most talked about criminal traditions in India! But for the ordinary villager, life is certainly safer with the sharp drop in crime. The total number of crimes in Morena district for instance, in the years 1984, 1985, and 1986 numbered 4,069, 4,089 and 3,948 respectively.

No recounting of dacoit history, however, can be complete without mentioning the legal outcome of the surrenders of the Malkhan, Phoolan and Ghanshyam gangs. The manner of the surrender in itself was historic, with the people, the police and the governments of UP, MP and Rajasthan working out a solution through faith, negotiations and yes, the cooperation of the criminals themselves. In the end, however, the government of UP has been unable to forgive the adventurous police of MP for smuggling Phoolan and her men across the border to enable them to surrender. Because of this, the UP government has stubbornly refused to transfer the cases against them to MP, with the result that matters have been stagnating for four and a half years.

Of the pending dacoity cases in UP, 48 are against Phoolan Devi—the most sensational being the one relating to her alleged mass killing of 23 Thakurs in Behmai in 1980. Her one-time associate, now husband, Man Singh has a tally of 41 cases to his name. In justification of their smuggling operations, a senior police official in MP declared, "Our feeling is that because she killed 23 Thakurs and she is of a low caste...the chances are if she is taken to UP, they might shoot her in police custody, inside or outside jail, in order to have vengeance." Caste feelings of such feudal intensity are therefore not the prerogatives only of the lawless—even the defenders of the law are not immune! However, the UP police can defend their demands to have Phoolan back on more pragmatic grounds, as Ayodhya Narayan Aphak, DIG, Gwalior Range explained: "The fact is, Phoolan is prepared to confess to the charges against her. And when the confession is going to be supported by the evidence which the UP police have got, conviction is a certainty. Then why waste the valuable time of the court, prosecution and government money?"

Whatever the outcome for Phoolan, one can reasonably assume that dacoits are becoming a thing of the past. The sordid and violent aspects of their actions will be dimmed from popular memory, while the relative drabness of current law and order will lend bold colour to the lawless past.

Nirmal Mitra/Morena