

## COVER STORY

# THE HUNT FOR PHOOLAN DEVI

On the afternoon of 31 March, when on an informer's tip-off the police surrounded Gulauli village in UP's Jalaun district, they thought they would finally get the dacoit queen Phoolan Devi; but she slipped away. Nirmal Mitra visited Gulauli to report on the massive hunt, and the encounter in which most of Phoolan's gang was wiped out.

**P**hoolan Devi, the dacoit queen, is a desperate woman today, running for her life. The whole police force of Uttar Pradesh seems to be after her; she is everyone's prize catch. More than half of her small gang has already been wiped out in one encounter with the police after another during this war that the police have launched on dacoits after the bloody revenge that Phoolan Devi took on the Behmai *thakurs* (see Sunday 15 March) who had once insulted and humiliated her. Other important dacoit leaders are angry with her; by this one outrage, she has invited a massive hunt for all of them. And one of her former associates, Baba Mustaqim some of whose men aided her in the Behmai attack, has already lost his life from a police bullet.

All that Phoolan Devi has left are a couple of followers, her weapons, the goodwill of her backward supporters in the villagers—and the guts and will to escape, fight and continue to spit at authority. She has, in the past weeks, escaped in miraculous ways from one police dragnet after another. (Things reached such a pass that there was great commotion in Lucknow when someone announced on 1 April that

Phoolan Devi had been arrested and was being brought to UP's capital by helicopter; it was later discovered to be an April Fool's joke. Even the news agencies had been taken in by this prank.)

The manner in which Phoolan Devi escaped from the police on 31 March makes an absolutely fascinating story, typical of all that has come to be associated with dacoits—violence, wit, presence of mind, and that important ingredient, a sense of honour. It seems straight out of a Bombay film.

Baba Mustaqim (he was a Muslim) was killed on 4 March near Akbarpur by the police. It is a principle among dacoits to honour those who have lost their lives in the dacoit tradition: readers would recall the dangers Pan Singh Tomar invited to honour the spirit of his dead brother. In Baba Mustaqim's village, Gulauli, in the Yamuna ravines, his relatives were in mourning—the Muslim period of mourning continues for 40 days. Honour demanded that Phoolan Devi visit Baba Mustaqim's house, and everyone knew that—including the police. The village of Gulauli and the nearby Sirauli, under the Kalpi police station, were certainly under surveillance, of both the police and their informers.

▲ Phoolan's men who were killed by the police: (top to bottom) Ram Shankar, Laltu and Prahlad Yadav



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Phoolan's gang were not in one place; it was a normal precaution. One group of three was in Sirauli, another three were living in a house in Gulauli. The two leaders and lovers, Phoolan and Man Singh Yadav, were in the region, but nobody managed till the end to find out exactly where. Also present was a member of Malkhan Singh's gang—come to negotiate perhaps, or perhaps to betray Phoolan, or perhaps to kill her on Malkhan's orders since she was the cause of their harassment; there are many theories floating around, and you are welcome to choose whichever impresses you best. (It is true, however, that the other gangs of the region, in Kanpur and Jalaun, are angry with Phoolan and not at all keen to help her survive; they feel that if the police can catch her then the heat on them will lessen, as the police will be satisfied with their prize catch.)

On 31 March, Dhruv Lal Yadav, station officer at the Kalpi police station, received word from a police informer that IR40 was in the vicinity. IR40 (inter-range 40) was the codename for Phoolan's gang; the information was quite specific too. The police knew that the gang could be found, if they moved immediately, at Sirauli and Gulauli. Yadav took a party of 15 policemen, armed with LMGs, rifles and handgrenades, and moved into Sirauli. They reached by noon, and, acting on the informer's directions, went towards the house of a person called Matadeen (he was the brother of Ram Shankar, one of Phoolan's associates.) The house was cordoned, and the police moved in. They accounted for Sobaran Singh (the visitor from Malkhan Singh's gang, and a

dhobi called Laltu who was also hiding inside) and Ram Shankar, who too was there.

The police were a little surprised to see Laltu with the dacoits; they recognised him as the washerman who had worked for the policemen themselves till not very long ago. "He must have been insulted by someone somewhere," sub-inspector Yadav said about Laltu. "If you abuse them, this is what they do. They pretend to accept the abuse, and say, 'all right sahib,' but the next time you see them they are in the ravines." The police recovered a US-made Winchester rifle from Sobaran Singh, a .315 rifle from Laltu and an Indian-made SBBL rifle from Ram Shankar.

This was only the beginning of the operation; the informer had promised a far bigger catch than just this. A wireless message had been sent to the SP, Jalaun, Mr Uma Shankar Bajpai, and he reached with additional, special anti-dacoity forces, more than 250 in number. Now the police began the real search for Phoolan Devi, Man Singh and their gang. They were particularly interested in a man called Bora and his house.

Gulauli is a very large village; its population is around 11,000. And 90 per cent of the people are Muslims. There are a handful of backward caste Hindu families (like yadavs and johars), but there are hardly any malahs, the caste to which Phoolan Devi belongs. This is the village which created Mustaqim, who once was in Malkhan Singh's gang and then later broke away to form his own powerful group. Mustaqim was a father-figure not only to the villagers but also to all

The Kalpi police station



The house of Karar Hussain in Gulauli; Phoolan and Man Singh supposedly hid in a dilapidated structure near this house



The door to the room where three of Phoolan's men were hiding



The pig sty where Baladin hid



the dacoit gangs operating in the Jaunpur and Kanpur districts, and he was respectfully and affectionately known as "Baba." He was quite devout, actually, in his religious faith, and the only vice he was known to commit was of course the well-known one of dacoity. But once again the Robin Hood syndrome appears; he was quite generous to the poor. He was a bit of a moralist, and often used to chide Phoolan Devi for her "promiscuity." Mustaqim's authority made Gulauli a "protected" village; no dacoit, big or small, attacked this village, either out of respect or out of fear. And the villagers too helped the dacoits, giving them shelter—relatively easy in a village as large as this one. Only once was Gulauli attacked—by a dacoit called Shiv Narain who had fallen out with

Mustaqim and wanted to take revenge, and that was about four years ago.

But on 31 March, the traditional scouts that always keep an eye out for danger whenever a dacoit gang rests at any place were either just not there, or were taking it easy. This was surprising, and Phoolan Devi and her gang were to pay a very heavy price for this.

The police reached Gulauli at around four in the afternoon, and surrounded the village. All the villagers were ordered to come out, in single file, to vacate their houses and wait outside in the open. Each woman was examined individually for any traces of resemblance to Phoolan Devi: the police did not have an accurate idea of what she looked like, since no one has a photograph, but they had a vague idea. They were trying to

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Sobaran Singh

prevent Phoolan Devi from escaping under a disguise.

The police finally reached one house they were looking for, the house of Nyamar Bora, and they, guns ready, surrounded it. The police information had been accurate. Inside were three members of Phoolan Devi's gang, Prahlad Yadav, Baladin and Prem Singh. The three had tried a last desperate ruse, and got someone to lock them up from outside so that an impression might be created that there was no one in the house. But the police shot open the locks, and calmly waited for the dacoits to come out. They did not. So the SP Mr Bajpai climbed onto the mud roof, and broke through the roof to take the dacoits by surprise. The dacoits finally opened up with their guns, and in the exchange, Prahlad Yadav and Prem Singh died on the spot. Four policemen, sub-inspector Surendra Pal Singh, sub-inspector Ram Bharose and constable Ranjit Singh, were injured (the police recovered two single barrel rifles later).

But Baladin was unhurt, and he came out, his arms high in the air in a gesture of surrender. Surrendering dacoits do not often get a chance to survive during an encounter, but, in any case, this time the police wanted some information. Mr Bajpai asked him the question: where was Phoolan Devi? Baladin replied: "She was here till eleven in the morning, but I do not know in which house." The police were relaxed after the tension of the gun battle; Baladin was obviously unarmed, and they began discussing what to do next, how to try and catch Phoolan Devi herself. Suddenly, when no one was looking, Baladin, in one swift movement, jumped out of the courtyard, ran out of the house and disappeared. One constable vainly sent a burst of LMG fire in the vague direction of a fleeing Baladin, but he had escaped.



The ruins of Mustaqim's house in Gulauli



The ruins of Mustaqim's brother, Muslim's house in Gulauli

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Sub-inspector Dhruv Lal Yadav

The police now concentrated on trying to capture Phoolan Devi and Man Singh Yadav. That both of them were there was confirmed to this reporter by the villagers themselves, and at least one police officer. But try as they might the police could not find them. Many villagers knew where they were hiding, but no one uttered a word of betrayal. They were in fact hiding in a dilapidated hut near the house of a person called Karar Hussain. A group of boys in this village told this reporter that Phoolan had managed to escape special attention by changing her dress. She first changed (from her normal police uniform) into a *salwar kameez* and then a *sari*. She emerged from hiding only after the police had left, on the next day (1 April), and when she came out she was back in her police uniform, a gun in hand—and her lover Man Singh by her side.

And how had Baladin managed to escape, despite the fact that there was a police cordon around the village, and even if he had managed to dodge the police at the place of the encounter, how had he got around the police surrounding the village? Baladin simply hid himself in a pig sty. He too only came out the next morning. The police just did not think anyone would hide there. The villagers had to spend the whole of that night out of their homes, because the police search in every house did not end till nine o'clock the next morning, on 1 April, but no one squealed. One side-effect of this police operation was that the whole area had a milk crisis on 1 April: Gulauli is the major source of milk for Kalpi tehsil.

Phoolan's most serious problem, while escaping the police, is her caste. Being a backward Hindu, a *mallah*, and particularly, one who has challenged the upper castes in such a violent manner. The attack on the *thakurs* of Behmai meant much more than a simple butchery of people; it was a challenge to the machismo of the

*thakur* clan. Phoolan cannot seek hospitality or help from anyone except, by and large, her own caste, the *mallahs* living in the ravines of the Yamuna, Betwa and Pahounch, between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. (The largest concentration of *mallahs* is in the Kuthaun police station region.)

The *mallahs* are generally poor, but not completely poverty-stricken. They are boatmen who eke out a living by ferrying people across the Yamuna. They live in villages near the river; they do not own much land, and their agriculture largely consists of growing eatables like pumpkins along the river banks. Phoolan Devi of course knows this region well.

The massive police hunt launched against the dacoit gangs in both UP and MP is having its effect, apparent-

ly. According to Mr B. P. Singhal, DIG, anti-dacoity operations, UP, the police have already accounted for the bulk of the dacoits who were involved in the Behmai massacre, barring the leaders—Phoolan, Ram Avtar and Balwan Garadia. Behmai was the scene of Phoolan's revenge, particularly against two *thakurs* called Lalaram and Sriram. She went to the village and asked the villagers to hand these two over, but nobody would tell her where they were (they were in nearby Dastampur). In a rage, she ordered a massacre with the cry "Jai Kali Mai" on her lips. She herself killed a few men; the rest were killed by others.

The massacre created a sensation; *thakur* chief minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh got together with his relative, chief minister Arjun Singh of

## Press versus police

More than policemen, it is journalists who are on the trail of Phoolan Devi. But the enthusiasm has already caused problems in Kanpur: it has brought the police and press to loggerheads over the question of what should be, and should not be, written.

When Vikram Mallah died in August 1980, the police claimed to have killed him in an encounter. Aaj's Manoj Pande and Arun Agarwal went to Baijamau village the day Vikram Mallah was killed, and gathered from local residents that only two shots had been fired, and the police did not kill Vikram. An enquiry was started. Later, after the Behmai killings, the police testified that Lalaram and Sriram Singh had, in fact, killed Vikram and captured Phoolan, thus contradicting their earlier statement. When Baba Mustaqim was killed, the police held that he was killed in an encounter. When Aaj's Vinod Shukla, Dilip Shukla, Manoj Pande and Ravivar's Santosh Bhartiya visited the spot, they learnt that it was the villagers who had, in the last analysis, got Mustaqim caught. In fact, the police did not know who the man they had caught was. The DIG, Kanpur, V. K. Jain, began pressurising the press to publish version. Inspectors Surendra Pal Sharma, Babu Purwa and O. P. Mishra of Kanpur Korwali police station came to the Aaj office in Bansmandi, Kanpur, and sat there the whole night to see what was going to be published the next day. Aaj brought out the villagers' version. The DIG, Mr Jain, complained about this to the paper's managing editor, S. V. Gupta.

The police were also irritated by Aaj's account of the Churkhi incident. The day after three policemen were butchered in the village by Lalaram and Sriram Singh, reporters Shailendra Dixit, Manoj Pande, Amar Singh and photo-

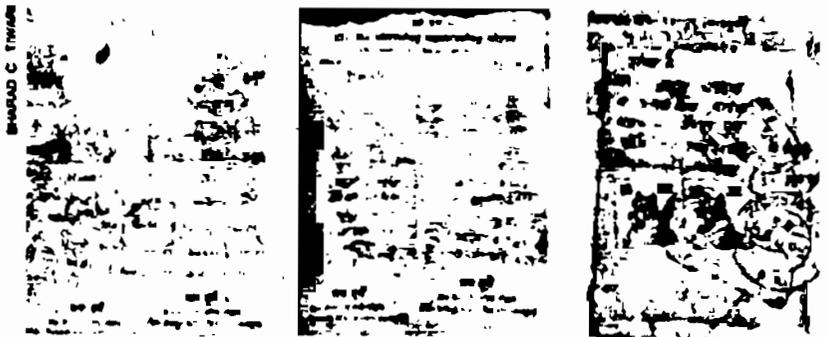
grapher Dinesh Sharma went to Churkhi and got to know that the dacoits had pulled one of the sub inspectors inside the room they were hiding in and, with a hatchet, had cut his neck and cut off his testicles, and burnt them. This was confirmed by the villagers, and later, the PAC men. When the story appeared in Aaj the next day, the SP, Jalaun, Uma Shankar Bajpai, reacted angrily. At a ceremony to mourn the death of the policemen in police lines, Jalaun, in the presence of home minister Rajendra Tripathi, the IG, DIG and other high-ranking officials, Mr Bajpai took the paper from Aaj's Orai correspondent, Harnarayan Gupta, read through the item and said: "Yeh sale akhbarwale sab jhooth likhte" (These bloody newsmen write lies). Mr Bajpai tore up the newspaper. At this, the deputy SP, L. D. Chandra, remarked "Saab, ham yeh kyon nahin kehte ki dakait presswale ko finance karte hain?" (Sir, why don't we say that the press is financed by dacoits?) Mr Gupta and the district journalists union president R. S. Datre protested that the officers were insulting the press. Bajpai replied: "You do not know what I can do. I can arrest you under the NSA." The two journalists walked out. Soon afterwards, Bajpai also walked out of the room and apologised to the pressmen. Two Lok Dal MLAs, Shankar Singh and Daiganjan Singh, raised this matter in the Assembly. The home minister said: "The SP has requested me to check Aaj's ways." The opposition protested loudly: "The government censors the press. Now will the house also be censored?" All the government did was to defend the police. The SP, Jalaun, did ask for the home secretary's permission to start legal proceedings against Aaj regarding the controversial report but the home secretary refused.

# The gangsters

There are nine listed dacoit gangs operating in the ravines: one of 25 to 30 men led by Ghanshyam (who is a *khengar*, a backward caste considered marginally superior to *mallahs*) operating in Jalaun, a part of Madhya Pradesh, and Etawah. The second, about 10 to 15 strong, is led by a *thakur*, Munna Dabar, and operates in MP and Jalaun. The third, around a dozen men, consisting of followers of Baba Mustaqim, operates in Jalaun. The fourth, seven to eight strong, led by two *thakurs* Lalaram and Sriram Singh, of Behmai fame, operates in Kanpur and Jalaun (of whom four have surrendered). The fifth, five to seven strong, is led by Ram Avtar, a *mallah*, and its area is Etawah, Kanpur and Jalaun (this gang, codenamed IS36 in police files, was a part of the one led by Vikram Mallah, who was killed by Lalaram and Sriram). The sixth, about eight strong, is led by Raghunath, a *mallah*, and lives off Kanpur, Jalaun and Hamirpur. The seventh, about five to six strong, is led by Vijay Chhetrapal, a *thakur*, and operates in Jalaun and Etawah. The eighth, about 10 to 12 strong, is led by Santosh Pandit, a *brahmin* (who, incidentally, is a B.A. and B.Ed!), and operates in a part of MP and Jalaun (this group is a breakaway from the Ghanshyam gang). The ninth, of course, is now a gang of three led by Phoolan Devi and Man Singh, a *mallah* and a *yadav*, respectively.

There was no organised gang in Kanpur district before the one led by Vikram Mallah (who was killed at the age of 27). There were small gangs here and there. But slowly the small-time criminals were wiped out. Vikram Mallah started an organised gang in August 1980, and it is from this group that many other gangs operating today emerged. Phoolan Devi joined him, to avenge the humiliation and oppression she suffered at the hands of *thakurs* in her village Shekhpur Gora. Vikram Mallah was a victim of gang rivalry; he was killed by Lalaram and Sriram Singh.

After Vikram Mallah was shot dead, Phoolan is said to have met Mustaqim to ask for a place in his ranks. First he refused to have her, but later allowed her to accompany his men. Phoolan managed to win the favour of a member of Mustaqim's gang, Man Singh Yadav, and the two left to form their own gang. Phoolan and Man Singh also came to an agreement with Ram Avtar Mallah, Raghunath Mallah and Balwan Garadia, to work together, while maintaining their separate



A letter (left) from Deo Narayan Tewari of Orai to his son, after he was kidnapped by Sriram and Lalaram Singh, asking for a ransom of Rs one lakh. On the other side of the letter (second from left) is a threat from Lalaram and Sriram: "If you do not act within a week, you will find your father's dead body on the road between Kalpi and Orai." More than dacoity, kidnapping is a popular crime among UP's gangsters.

identities. Eventually, all these gangs came under the common leadership of Mustaqim. Whenever they went out on a mission, they raised the slogan "Baba Mustaqim ki jai." In all, they were about 40 men and women; their common enemies were the *thakurs*, especially Lalaram and Sriram.

Mustaqim, who was opposed to murder, disapproved of the Behmai killings. But Phoolan was determined to get her bloody revenge. The result was a parting of ways between Phoolan and Mustaqim. Mustaqim never approved of unnecessary killings, especially mass killings. For instance, when Balwan Garadia's sister was raped by a police officer, and Balwan screamed for revenge, Mustaqim ensured that only the officer got killed, and nobody else.

Since February, there have been a series of encounters in which both the police and gangsters have suffered serious losses. On 24 February, at about 12 noon, Balwan's gang was traced in Behta village. (The price on Balwan's head was Rs 2,000.) In the gang was also a woman, Meera Thakur. An exchange of fire followed between the police and the gangsters, after which they were chased over 35 kms to Berwa river, which meets the Yamuna at Hamirpur. Some of the dacoits tried to disguise themselves as labourers at a brick kiln, while three of them took up positions, and waited for the policemen. In the firing that followed, inspector Moolchand, SO, Bhognipur police station was hit in the leg and fell. Another officer with him, sub-inspector Udenia managed to escape injury. Meanwhile, a PAC party approached the area from another direction. They spotted the two policemen, and, mistaking them for bandits, resdied to open fire on them. Inspector Moolchand

and Udenia threw up their hands and shouted that they were policemen, not gangsters. But the PAC thought this to be a trick, and opened fire. Moolchand fell. Soon, one of the dacoits pounced on him from behind, grabbed his rifle and killed the officer. The PAC men, realising their mistake, attacked the dacoits with grenades and killed six of them, including Balwan Garadia himself (who was in an SP's uniform).

On 27 March, a police party consisting of one station officer, one sub-inspector and five constables, on receiving information that a dacoity was about to take place, went to Seme village at 3 pm. When they reached the place, they heard that Lalaram and Sriram were there. Not sure which house the dacoits were in, the policemen started a search.

When they reached the house of one Banwari Lal Kutil, and opened the door, Lalaram and Sriram, who were hiding inside, opened fire. Sub inspector Bhure Lal was hit, and fell dead. SO Kali Ram and constable Indrajit Singh were also shot dead. The dacoits then escaped with two rifles and 50 cartridges taken from the dead policemen.

The intensification of police activity has not really affected the crime rate. Even after the Behmai killings, until 1 April, there have been three cases of kidnapping by dacoits. On 9 March Gyan Singh was kidnapped from the Ata police station area by the Amar Singh gang of MP; in the third week of March, a wholesale *bidi* dealer, Shyam Sundar Purwar, was kidnapped by a gang led by Raju Bhatnagar from the Orai police station area; and in the last week of March, Chaturvedi was kidnapped by the Vijay Singh gang from the Kuthaun police station area.

Madhya Pradesh and promised that dacoity would be stopped. Except for just one person, the rest of Ram Avtar's gang has been liquidated over the last month. And the other gangs are jittery, and blame Phoolan for this unwanted attention from the police. Even Raghunath Mallah, who belongs to the same caste as Phoolan, is not willing to help her. Mustaqim has been killed, and nine of his gang members have joined Malkhan's group. The main target of the police currently, is Phoolan.

Gulauli was the second close shave Phoolan Devi had. The first was a chance encounter SI Dhruv Lal Yadav and his men had with her on the very day of the Behmai killings. Mr Yadav bit and clicked his tongue in regret as he recounted how he had missed Phoolan. Early in the morning on 15 February 1981, the day after the Behmai incident, Yadav and his men were patrolling the ravines near Mukdalan, near Phoolan's village. Yadav said, "I am sure the gang had got to know that there were some men in the vicinity, and they suspected we were Lalaram and Sriram's gang not policemen. We had left deep footprints in the earth, and hence an easy trail. At about 2 am at night we heard a voice from nearby, *kaun hai?* (who is there?) The voice could not have been more than 25 yards away. I had seen Ram Avtar when he had come to jail once. I had seen him for about 24 hours. I immediately recognised his voice. We crouched and crawled on our hands and knees. Then I heard Avtar loading his gun. One of the constables with us then made the sad mistake of panicking: he let off a wild burst on his LMG. This scared off the gangsters and gave away our identity as policemen. If we could somehow have made them believe that we were not policemen, they would have fallen into the trap and tried to attack us. I was unlucky—I always am, when it comes to getting Phoolan Devi. See how Baladin ran away."

There is a bank officer in Orai, one of whose relatives was once kidnapped by the Phoolan gang. He provided some interesting details about Phoolan. She is extremely clever. She never stops for the night in any village; she loves peanuts; she is a fine marksman and runs "like a deer." The kidnapped man was taken to the jungles, and treated well (he was given six *chapparis* a day to eat) but was under constant guard. Every hour the guard was replaced by another man. While the rest of the gang slept with the hostage, Phoolan and her lover Man Singh slept together, separate from the others. According to the person kidnapped, Phoolan is not as crude as most people imagine. She does manage to dominate over Man Singh (like many other women over their lovers/husbands). Phoolan Devi has a wheatish complexion, a longish face, bobbed hair, but is not very healthy. Two things she is fond of: tying red ribbons as a headband and wristband, and black clothes.



The bridge over the Yamuna; Phoolan is understood to have crossed it on foot four days before the Gulauli shootout

Although the anti-dacoity operations intensified after the Behmai killings (Behmai is now considered the transition point in police activities; the new DIG anti-dacoity operations B. P. Singhal, has set up his headquarters at the Kalpi government guest house, from where he is keeping a round-the-clock vigil), Phoolan's truncated gang is still proving too clever for them. And this is not because of the respective weapons the two sides use. Mr Singhal says: "Basically the fight against dacoits is dependent on two factors: cultivating information about the gangs and the force quantum. But the strength of the force etc is only of secondary importance. We have enough men and firepower. What we need is powerful binoculars and the use of helicopters: binoculars also help in identifying our own forces so that we do not shoot at them by mistake." The gangsters know these weaknesses too well themselves; that is why most of them dress in police uniform.

For instance, during the encounter against Balwan's gang on 24 February, the SP's force was on the western and eastern side of the target. It could not be informed about the approach of another police party from another direction, and the SP's men got a burst of LMG fire from the other policemen. "Binoculars could have come in handy in that situation. True, the dacoits were also in uniform, but their uniforms are shabbier from days of wear and tear." As for the helicopter, Mr Singhal says, it has proved to be useful in two big ways: to locate the position of dacoits quickly; and airdrop policemen.

In the enthusiasm currently visible, a helicopter has been sanctioned for anti-dacoity operations, but it is as good as useless. It is stationed in Lucknow, and even in an emergency it cannot be put into use immediately. The problem here, according to Mr Singhal, is the civil aviation regulations governing the use of the helicopters. According to these it must land and take off at specified helipads. Obviously, in anti-dacoity operations these rules cannot be followed. In fact, after the helicopter was used in violation of civil aviation rules in an encounter at Churkhi, the pilot, Shekhar Singh, was grounded.

After the Behmai killings, the government asked the police to specify its needs. The state IG, home secretary, chief secretary and finance secretary are understood to be considering a proposal to appoint an additional SP in the dacoity-prone areas. As long ago as 1960 a recommendation had been made for self-loading rifles, motor-boats, jeeps etc. But nothing materialised. It was only after Behmai that the police have been supplied SLRs.

Prices on heads do not help either, says Mr Singhal. Before the Behmai killings, the price on Phoolan's head was Rs 1,000. After the incident, it shot up to Rs 10,000. "I am against such rewards. They only encourage dacoity; it becomes a dacoit's ambition to boast of a price on his or her head. I suggest making a flat reward of Rs 500 for the arrest of every leading outlaw."

Another problem the police face is during an actual encounter. The local population are invariably sympathetic to the outlaws, and help them with information. Also "fighting dacoits is worse than fighting a guerrilla war, where you can fire indiscriminately. Here you have to account for every bullet and firearm, and be careful not to kill innocents," Mr Singhal pointed out.

Mr Singhal had an extraordinary suggestion to solve the dacoit menace: enacting a law that would enable the police to arrest close relatives of the wanted men and women. (Incidentally he himself is happy that the dacoits have never tried carrying on vendettas against policemen's families. "Thankfully, you know too well this will not help. If you kill a policeman another will take his place," Mr Singhal said). "After all, how much of the money that they make from kidnap ransoms can they spend on their own?" Mr Singhal asked. Dacoits are always on the run from ravine to ravine and jungle to jungle. All they spend on is weapons—a gang needs at least an extra Rs 50,000 for weapons every year. As for food and clothes, they only have to descend on villages for their *nazrana*. The rest of the money, Mr Singhal is convinced, goes to relatives. "Even if a such a law is unjust, it is injustice which is reversible. A dacoit's murders are not."

# How Mustaqim was killed

At eight o' clock in the morning of 4 March, two men got down from a bus at Galuapur in Kanpur district. One of them was carrying a bag. Having rested for about 15 minutes, they proceeded on foot to their destination—Dastampur, a village about two furlongs from Galuapur. A dusty path leads to the village which ends at a mosque at the edge of the village. As they were proceeding, two policemen—a sub-inspector and a constable—on a bicycle approached them from the opposite direction. While one of the men ignored the policemen, the one carrying the bag got nervous, left the path and started walking away. The policemen got suspicious, told them to stop, and enquired about their identities. They were told to open their bag. The constable suddenly spotted a revolver in the bag. But before he could react, one of the two men grabbed the revolver and started grappling with the sub-inspector. What the sub-inspector did not know then was that the person who was grappling with him was none other than Baba Mustaqim, a dreaded dacoit with a reward of Rs 20,000 on his head (Mustaqim was a close lieutenant of Malkhan Singh but had, last year, formed his own gang). The man carrying the bag was his cousin, Imamuddin.

While Mustaqim fought with sub-inspector Hariram Pal, the constable caught hold of Imamuddin. In the course of the fighting, however, the revolver slipped from Mustaqim's hand and fell, breaking the trigger. Realising that the two men were now unarmed, Hariram Pal shouted for help. But none of the villagers who had gathered came forward to help. Fortunately for the sub-inspector, however, a group of boys going to a nearby college saw what was happening and came to the aid of the policemen. They caught Mustaqim and Imamuddin and beat them up. All along, Hariram kept asking the two people who they were. Finally Mustaqim looked at the sub-inspector and said: "Do you want to know who I am? I am Baba Mustaqim."

There was a stunned silence. No one could have imagined that Baba Mustaqim would be caught, and that too in such a manner. The first person to react was Hariram Pal. He told the crowd of villagers to move away and asked one of them to go to Derapur police station and get reinforcements. After that he sat down beside the two men, now tied up with chords, and waited for the reinforcements to arrive.

Baba Mustaqim was very tired. On the night of 3 March he had left



Mustaqim



Imamuddin

Kanpur for Dastampur. His plans were interesting. He wanted to meet his brother before proceeding for Bombay. After the Behmai incident, the heat was on and the police were giving the *baghis* a very tough time. As a matter of fact, Mustaqim had admonished Phoolan Devi for massacring so many people. He himself did not believe in killing people indiscriminately. Anyway,

he thought, in Bombay at least he could lose himself in the crowd and relax. Accordingly, he had come to meet his brother to give him some money. He had picked up Imamuddin at Akbarpur and taken a bus for Galuapur. But before he could reach Dastampur he was caught.

Shortly, four constables arrived in a tempo. Mustaqim knew what was coming. He told the sub-inspector that he could kill him, but Imamuddin should be spared as he was innocent. Hariram Pal assured him that no one would be killed. But Mustaqim knew this was a lie. He then said that he had some money with him which he wanted to distribute among the poor. According to eyewitnesses, there was a neat bundle of 100 rupee notes, which could have amounted to as much as Rs one lakh. The sub-inspector kept the bundle along with four rings from Mustaqim's fingers, his watch and a chain. Baba Mustaqim then kissed his amulet, and once again requested the police to spare the life of Imamuddin. This time the policeman did not say anything. Instead he instructed the constables to throw them into the tempo. Mustaqim and Imamuddin were dumped like sacks into the tempo; the policemen got in and drove off. From Galuapur, they took the road to Derapur. But instead of proceeding to the police station they stopped near a bridge. They dragged Mustaqim out. He was first shot dead with a twelve bore gun and then the rest of the constables riddled the dead body with bullets. After this, Imamuddin was dragged out and shot equally brutally.

This story has been gathered from eyewitness accounts. The police, however, have a more respectable version. According to them, on the morning of 4 March two groups of policemen were returning from duty when they spotted two men. On seeing the police, both men started running. When the policemen tried to stop them, they opened fire. The policemen returned the fire and killed both of them. They later learnt that one of the persons they had shot dead was Baba Mustaqim while the other, they said, remained unidentified.

Twenty seven days after Baba Mustaqim was shot dead, Phoolan Devi, along with Man Singh and five other members of her gang went to meet his brother to pay her condolences and narrowly missed getting caught by the police, after a 15-hour ordeal. Had she been caught alive, she would have, probably, suffered the same fate as Mustaqim.