

Vendetta in Sitapur

A family feud leaves 23 dead

“I saw four of them, Ram Pal and three others, rushing towards our house, guns in hand. I ran to bolt the door. Then I heard bullets hitting the wall, whistling past. Shivlal and I threw ourselves on the floor and lay still.

They were shouting abuses. *Maro sale Shivlal ko! Nikle to goli mardeo!* I saw two of them on the roof. Then I could feel the heat, and the smoke. I don't know what happened after that. I fainted. *Sahib*, I do not know how I am alive.” Shivdeen Yadav

(40) spoke in wide-eyed terror, as members of his still dazed family, hands to their faces, heard in silence. One of several survivors of a dastardly act of revenge by one Yadav family on another—a brutal sequel to a four-year quarrel which started over a stolen bicycle, then a mango tree—that left 23 dead and charred, 11 of them children, seven women, and a large, 40-roomed house burnt to ashes, Shivdeen, his brothers and his family, face a dark uncertainty. The wealth they had earned from years of hard work has been consumed by a spiteful envy—which grew into a violent family feud involving rape and murder. Overnight, their fortunes have changed, from abundance to penury. And, with most of their young dead, they have hardly anything to look forward to.

The 23 corpses, wrapped in cloth, lined in a morgue in Sitapur, made a ghastly sight. As many as 22 of the dead were from the same family, and one, Bhagwati alias Bhabhuti Yadav, who was murdered on 1 January, from the other. It was to avenge his murder that the 22 others were killed. Three of the 22, Dwarika, his wife Chhidwani and their daughter Phoolwali were riddled with bullets. The other 19 include three children who died of suffocation, and 16 others who were roasted alive. Grotesquely disfigured, some of the bodies were just misshapen lumps of burnt flesh; the body of one of the women had a whole leg burnt off, and just a bone for a limb. Outside the morgue, a crowd of sobbing relatives waited for a look at the corpses.

Mohaddipur's Yadavs, a quiet, hardworking, intensely competitive lot, who have seen no trouble in the last two years, have been shattered by the carnage. Surprised at what jealousy within a family can do—the two families are related to each other—the men and women seem confused about what to think of it all. Although the quarrel between the two families was well known, nobody had thought it would be so vicious. Most of the survivors of the attack had fled the village for fear of their lives, even after being rescued by the police and other villagers. Only on 4 December, a good 48 hours after the massacre, when the embers were still burning, did some of them



The storeroom where 11 children were burnt alive

dare to come back—to see their homes in ashes and ruins, littered with signs of the raging fire.

The district of Sitapur, known for its hardened criminals, has always been a problem for the police. The liberal issue of gun licences makes things worse. Besides, Mohaddipur, with its large Yadav population—of the 45 families who live in it, all, save one, are Yadavs—has always had the tensions and conflicts of a fast-growing backward caste community that has struck it rich. Even though the violence never came out in the open, disputes over land and property—common obsessions among a people desperate to outstrip each other in a race for wealth and power—are usual, especially between in-laws and cousins.

The two warring families, whose patriarchs are Jagannath (70) and Lilkantha (72), brothers themselves (who are not directly involved in the clash, however), live in separate quarters of the same neighbourhood of Mohaddipur. Lilkantha's is the larger of the two houses, a huge, sprawling mud-and-thatched roof structure built like a honeycomb, with over 40 large and small rooms, four courtyards, but hardly any way of getting out unnoticed. A virtual fortification, the house was also a death-trap. A joint family of 70 lived in it; most of them ate and slept there and toiled in the fields for the rest of the day. "Twelve *chullas* (earthen stoves) burnt here," said a villager about the house. Lilkantha's house also had three tubewells, and 40 bullocks and cows. Jagannath's family, which was not as well off, has 35 members, who own about 12 cows and bullocks, and much less land than Lilkantha's massive 400 bighas.

The first quarrel between the two families, though of a minor nature, was over a bicycle belonging to a *dudhwala* (milkman) which was recovered by Chandrika, a member of Jagannath's family, from the house of Sham Lal, of the rival family. Sham Lal was accused of stealing it. Later, tension arose over a plot of land that had changed hands between the two groups. Shival Yadav, one of Lilkantha's sons, had bought the land from Chandrika's brother Jawahar. Chandrika is related to Shival's family through marriage; he is Shival's brother Puran's own brother-in-law. Probably because it hurt his ego to see his own family losing land to his in-laws, Chandrika resented the sale. The nine-bigha plot, in Kol village, grows wheat and arhar and was sold off with proper sale deeds for Rs 1,000 or so.

Originally Jagannath's, it had with it a house and a mango tree. After

the sale, there were quarrels between Chandrika, Jawahar, Chandrika's father Raggha and Jagannath on one side, and Shival and family on the other. Although by law Shival was the new owner, Chandrika laid claim to the tree. Often the dispute would be taken to the headman of Mohaddipur, Sardar Singh, but Chandrika's group found him siding with Shival. The bitterness increased. Perhaps to teach Shival a lesson, Chandrika cut the tree down. At the end of 1982, villagers say, Lilkantha's grandson Mewalal's (30) young wife was raped by Barati (35), Chandrika's son-in-law. A criminal

from Baisampur village in the Misrih tehsil, under the Chandanao police station area, Barati was a corrupting influence in the otherwise peaceful village. "Ever since he began staying in Chandrika's house," a villager said, "there have been fights and threats in this place. He was a notorious criminal, close to Ram Bhagat Singh, a noted criminal of Misrih. It was Barati who was responsible for all this trouble."

Vengeance came soon afterwards. Shival's men killed Barati and later, one of Chandrika's sons, Bhagwandin (28), in the village of Murka in December 1982. After making indepen-



Shydeen Yadav (sitting); behind him stands Pyarelal, his rescuer



Two of the survivors with Pyarelal

dent inquiries into the double murder, Chandrika's other son Bhagwati alias Bhabhuti (25) lodged a police complaint, naming ten persons in his FIR: Mewalal, Chhotelal (35), Shival (45), Ram Swarup (24), Brijmohan (55), Rajan (32), Puran (27), Baikunth (35), Kunwar (27) and the headman of Mohaddipur Sardar Singh (35). The case is on in the Sitapur district sessions court. The next date for hearing was 15 January.

The murder case, over a year-and-a-half old, had been worrying Shival and his brothers, who were

implicated. And since Bhagwati happened to be the only person who knew enough about the case to cause them trouble, they decided to remove him. On 1 January, when he was returning from Sidhauri, Shival and his men allegedly kidnapped him from a spot on a dirt track to the west of Bare village, roughly three km from Mohaddipur, between 5 pm and 5.30 pm. When they found that he had not returned home for long, Chandrika's family started a search for Bhagwati that lasted all night. On the morning of 2 January, Bhagwati's younger brother Bahadur (18) chanced upon his dead body in a pool

of blood, in an *arhar* field. Beside it lay a blank cartridge, his *chappals*, a muffler and a bicycle on its side. It was between 7.30 am and 8 am. Aghast, Bahadur ran to his family in the village shrieking "*Daddu ko mar daley gaye!*" (Grand father has been killed)." The rumour that had been afloat in the village the whole night, and Chandrika's worst suspicions, were confirmed.

Chandrika and another of his sons, Chattrapal (22), made their way to the Sidhauri police station, six km away, to lodge a complaint. But the case was not registered until the next day, 3 January. According to the police, they got to know of the murder from Chandrika and his son around 11 am on 2 January, but residents of the area near the police station, which is located on the main road to Sitapur, say that the complainants had arrived around 10 am. In the half hour that followed Chandrika's visit, the police claim they got to know of an attack by Chandrika's family on Shival's house. Their first reaction was to look for Chandrika and his son, whom they apprehended from the Sidhauri bus stop where they were waiting to board a bus for Lucknow.

In Mohaddipur, around the time Chandrika and his son were making their complaint, other members of his family were wreaking vengeance on Shival. According to eyewitnesses, Chandrika's family members "had gone mad." They had all left their home, as though seized by some alarming news, with the doors ajar. Plates full of food, clothes and bedclothes strewn on the floor were left as they were. Bahadur, Ram Pal, Ram Dayal and Rajaram, armed with 12 bore guns, were seen approaching Shival's well-fortified house. In an attempt to escape, Dwarika, his wife Chhidwani and daughter Phoolwali scampered out of the front door, and were gunned down instantly. In a dirt road in front of Dwarika's room, strands of the little girl's hair could be seen sticking to a mud wall; other walls bore large patches of blood, and so did the ground below.

The three done to death, the attackers climbed on to the roof of the house and started calling out the men. They caught sight of Shivrinarin first, on the steps leading to his room. But as they took aim, the frightened man fell on the ground and jumped for cover inside. Seeing that the attackers had gone up to the roof, more than 30 men, women and children, instead of trying to escape, ran into the inner recesses, a number of small, low-ceilinged, ill-ventilated rooms used for storing grains and

farming equipment, to hide there. The attackers saw that the people in the house had been trapped for there was no way they could escape and went about setting fire to the dry, thatched roof from all sides. As the flames leapt, they threatened to shoot anyone who tried to escape. They had even blocked the door from outside. Of the 27 people shut inside, 19 were roasted alive and the remaining eight—most of them in an outer room—were found unconscious by the police and other villagers when they broke through a wall to rescue them at around 12.30 pm, a good two hours after the fire had started.

"I saw Ram Pal and three others coming towards our house with guns," said a still dazed Shivdeen Yadav, Shival's brother. "Then I heard bullets from his gun..." After a while, I could clearly see Bahadur and Mahavir standing on the roof, setting the house on fire. Burning embers were falling around us. Shival and I lay on the floor. I saw Bahadur strike a match and put it to the roof." Pyarelal, a lad of 17 who rushed to help the victims after the marauders had fled, said, "I saved Shivdeen and Shival, and later brought the police. The chowkidar of Bare, Brijlal, also came to help." "The whole house was on fire, *sahib*," said Shivdeen, refusing to stop. "I could barely see anything. The burning roof was falling on us. But Bahadur and his men did not see the two of us. They went away. *Muqaddar se bachay* (fate has saved us)." According to Shivdeen, after setting Shival's house on fire, the attackers were planning another onslaught on the house of Babu, a relative of Sohan, Shival's brother, in Shahibajpur village, but failed.

The officer-in-charge of the Sidhauri police station, Rizwan Hyder, visibly shaken by the whole affair, had never guessed matters could come to such a pass. He had known of the enmity between the two families, and had prior information of the murder, and the likelihood of a violent reprisal. Why did he not act? In the four months that he has been posted in Sidhauri he had learnt that Mohaddipur was trouble-free for the last two years since the double murder at the end of 1982. "There has been no fighting here, no clashes of any sort," he told this reporter, and then went about calling villagers to corroborate what he said: "Say, you," he shouted to a woman, and an old man standing nearby. "Was there anything here, ever?" "No *sahib*," everyone said, eyeing the policeman.

Take the villagers aside, and it is a



A view of Shivdeen's burnt house

different story, however. "This whole thing started with a tree. On 21 August 1983," Hyder said, "Chandrika cut the mango tree on the land that had been sold to Shival. A fortnight later, Barati and Bhagwandin were murdered. Bhabhuti filed the complaint, naming Shival and his associates, and on 1 January Shival and his men kidnapped and killed him. Chandrika's group retali-



Six-year old Munni

ated by setting Shival's house on fire. We tried our best to put it out. A police jeep came within half-an-hour, but since water had to be lifted out of a well, the operation proved difficult." Hyder and his men, when they arrived, found the entire village almost deserted, with not a soul around to call out for help. After yelling for some time, a middle-aged woman came out to assist the police. "We rescued this girl, Munni," Hyder said, pointing to a child with a head wound. "She was fired at. We took her out of one of the outer rooms, opening into a courtyard."

Curiously, however, Shival Yadav, whom Chandrika had named in his complaint for the murder of his son Bhabhuti, was allowed to flee Mohaddipur after being rescued. The fact that Chandrika's complaints were never taken seriously, and Shival and his family, the richer and more powerful of the two, have always found favour with the authorities, has led to suspicions of police complicity in the feud. People in the village talk of how easily murders are committed, after bribing the police.

A large portion of Shival's and his brothers' wealth has gone up in smoke. "There was so much money in this house," said Shabir Ali of Bare, pointing to the ruins. "Just four of their cows cost Rs 70,000. Shival himself lost Rs 5,000. And it was all hard-earned. They all worked with their bare hands." But for the Yadavs, prosperity has brought its own evils: jealousy and hatred. The climax to the vendetta is perhaps still to come—with yet another bloody revenge.

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