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PAUSE IN THE BADLANDS

From Our Staff Correspondent

BHOPAL—An obscure spot, a little away from the Pagora dam near Subargarh, Morena district, has almost overnight become the site of a large and colourful village fair. About 50 bandits of the Chambal valley—the badlands of Madhya Pradesh—are camping there ready to surrender to the Sarvodaya leader, Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan, who has picked up the threads of Acharya Vinoba Bhave's unfinished "change of heart" mission nearly 12 years ago.

Hundreds of people visit the spot daily to meet these desperadoes. These dacoits are mostly small fry; the bigger gangs are waiting in the wings. They have chosen strategic positions for their camps, ready to "jump into the ravines" as the locals put it, if the surrender terms are not acceptable and police renew their operations.

How far the present move to secure the surrender of the major gangs will succeed is difficult to say. In any case surrender by a few gangs will not solve the problem, new gangs are bound to be formed. Acharya Vinoba Bhave's mission, during which this reporter accompanied him, proved to be of little use. The present move is not likely to do any better, though some dacoits, mostly on the run, will lay down their arms. The police might feel cheated, because they are poised for a big offensive and summer in the Chambal valley is usually the "hunting season" for them.

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One of the notorious dacoit leaders, Madho Singh, whose gang has been severely mauled—he lost 11 of his best men in encounters with the police over the years—is apparently eager to surrender and may be able to persuade Nathu Singh to follow suit.

Mohar Singh, who belongs to Jatpura village in Bhind district, is a well-built fair-complexioned man of 38. He carries a prize of Rs 2 lakhs on his head. A ruthless killer, there is an unrelieved pattern of bestiality about him. Madho Singh, 37, with a prize of Rs 1 lakh on his head, is also a fair, well-built man. An ex-serviceman from Garhla, in Agra district, he still goes about in Army uniform. At one time he was a homeopathic practitioner. Nathu Singh comes from Konthar (Porsa) in Morena district and the prize set on his head is Rs 20,000. Of his village it is said, "You lift a stone in Konthar and you will find a dacoit underneath." Among the other gangs are those of Makhani Singh, Harbilas Kachl, Saru Singh, Chote Singh, Sobran Singh, Kalvan Singh and Janga-Phoola. (Janga was recently killed in U.P.)

The State Chief Minister, Mr. P. C. Sethi, first barred reporters from covering the surrender but seems to have relented later. He welcomes the dacoit's sur-



Some of the dacoits who surrendered to Acharya Vinoba Bhave. The man in the centre with the big mustache is Kanhai, brother of Roopa, the bandit chief.

render, but says that their past crimes will not be forgotten.

In 1960 much was made of the surrender of 20 dacoits to Acharya Vinoba Bhave until the then Inspector-General of Police, Mr. K. F. Rustumji, made a scathing attack on the programme. Much propaganda is being done about the present move also. Few realize that dacoits often surrender once they feel that the police dragnet is closing on them. Since the anti-dacoity operations were launched in May, 1957, 500 have surrendered to the police.

Some of those who surrendered have given up their old way of life. Typical is Dhurandan Singh. At the age of 20, nearly 15 years ago, he "jumped into the ravines" and joined the gang of "Lakhan the Terrible". Two gruesome murders by the gang so unnerved him that he left the gang and surrendered to the police. In reprisal Lakhan Singh killed all three of his brothers.

Dhurandan was tried but acquitted. He began cultivating a plot of land, built a small house and gave Rs 2,000 for a temple. The place is now known as Dhurandan-kapra. In 1970 he married for the second time and the same year he was elected sarpanch of his village panchayat. He holds a gun licence and carries his weapon proudly. This is his only guarantee against reprisals either by the remnants of his old gang or from those whom he had wronged as a bandit. The same fear of reprisal also haunts Lukka, who surrendered to Acharya Vinoba Bhave.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the Vinoba mission's failure to solve the problem is that all the three main bandit leaders, Mohar Singh, Madho Singh and Nathu, came into prominence only later. Before 1960 they were almost un-

known. They suddenly appeared on the scene and went on a rampage of dacoity, looting, murder, rape and kidnapping, as if to make up for the absence of the "big ones" who had surrendered to the Acharya. Between 1960 and now the three gangs have committed about 600 offences.

In the "change of heart" mission one is inclined to forget the terrible past of these men. Also overlooked is the fact that often influential relatives of dacoits are interested in their surrender because they feel that one day they are bound to be killed by the police.

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The historical and social background of the problem is also forgotten. In the turbulent Chambal ravines too often killing for revenge is looked upon as the hallmark of bravery and a sneaking admiration for the killers persists even today. No wonder the bandits are referred to more as "baghis" (rebels) than "dakkus".

Sprinkled with treacherous ravines that run over about 2,000 sq. miles, Bhind, Morena, Gwalior, Datia and Shivpuri districts of northern Madhya Pradesh, covering approximately 6,000 sq. miles, have been over the years a paradise for freebooters and smugglers. The ravines, the result of erosion by the Chambal river, have in the past provided ideal hide-outs to Pindaris and other bandits who fought the Delhi Sultans bitterly.

The bane of the area has been numerous land disputes, clanish feelings and quarrels between Brahmins, Rajputs, Thakurs, Jats, Ahirs and Gujars. The region's primitive economy has only added fuel to the fire.