

CITIZENS

From SAEED NAQVI

JAURA, Apr 15—There was a rush for the venue despite the shrewd us to proceed only after we had produced a hurriedly acquired Sarvodaya badge.

The surrender by the dacoits was to take place outside Gandhi Ashram in Jaura later that evening, now we were headed for the seven miles away, where Sarvodaya workers had organised a private function to welcome the outlaws back into the fold of society.

For some reason outsiders were barred but word had spread and thousands had made their way in the heat to catch a glimpse of men whose names are perversely woven with the romance of the Chambal valley.

SARVODAYA RITUALS

By the time we reached the dak bungalow a crowd about fifty deep had made a circle round the shalmiana where the dacoits sat cross-legged on the floor. Directly in front was Mr Jayaprakash Narayan on a chair and Mrs Narayan by his side. Behind, in the verandah of the dak bungalow were families of the dacoits, some of them in flushing saris.

"That is Mohar Singh's mother", someone whispered. "that, in a pink sari, is Madho Singh's wife". "She is very intelligent", one of

Shouts of Mohar Singh ki jai, Madho Singh ki jai rent the air.

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR

It seemed strange, the behaviour of people who one imagined had lived in terror of the dacoits. Suddenly two drumbeaters appeared from somewhere singing eulogies of Mohar Singh to the strange rhythms of their drums. This had a curious effect on the other gang members seated around Mohar Singh. They took out thick packets of one-rupee notes, made imaginary circles round Mohar Singh's head with the hand in which they held money, then sprinkled the notes on the multitude below. The sky was full of one-rupee notes.

Screaming, hauling crowds vied with each other to clutch at the fragments of strange generosity. Mohar Singh sat back, his hands folded across his chest, apparently taking it all for granted.

Below, in the valley where the various gangs were camping, the same enthusiasm was in evidence. Take Madho Singh's camp. This was a brick structure with a single room on the first floor, a small balcony jutting out towards the Chambal river. Two armed guards stood at the gate below holding back the surging crowd. "Chief is relaxing on the first floor with his family".

Fortunately, I had been introduced to him by Mr Jayaprakash Narayan, and that was passport enough. I was ushered in.

ARMY LIFE

Madho Singh was reclining against the wall; his wife, mother and 10-year-old son sat at the far end of the room. Conversation turned to his career. He joined the army in 1934 but left it in 1938 after his father's death.

He became a homoeopathic physician. His elder brother was a village sarpanch, a station that generated some rivalries in the village.

He was implicated—so he alleges—by the police in a case with a gypsy girl. This led to violence, and marked the beginning of his career as a dacoit.

For the past few years he had grown weary of his life as a fugitive and had spent a good deal of his time in the cities including a prolonged stay in New Delhi's Ashoka Hotel.

He was rambling on in his polite well-modulated voice when the door opened. A petitioner barged in. The courts had decided the case in his favour but local village pressure had deprived him of his rightful property, he needed Madho Singh's help.

"I doubt if I can help now", Madho Singh replied. You see I am about to lay down arms." It seemed ironical.

As I withdrew the crowd outside swelled to a few thousands demanding darshan. The window to the balcony opened and Madho Singh made a brief appearance like some mediaeval chief waving to the crowd.

By now it was time to leave for the surrender ceremony at Jaura where an even bigger crowd awaited the "celebrities". I found it difficult to reconcile this reverential awe for men who had lived by murder, kidnapping and plunder.

But later Madho Singh himself summed up the situation succinctly. "The people have learnt to live with terror, the rough and ready justice administered by the dacoits has acquired a function in their lives. It will take more than a few hundred surrenders to change the mind of men".

the Sarvodaya ladies hurried in "indeed" the woman retorted in a clear, ringing voice: "I had to be otherwise it would have been difficult to survive these past 12 years when my husband was playing hide and seek with the police". She had large eyes, heavily lined with kohl and an unmistakably shrewd gaze.

Meanwhile, under the shanties the usual Sarvodaya rituals were on—women, tying rakhs on the hands of "our" rebel brothers" chanting bhajans and distributing prasad. The dacoits sat passively, perhaps reflecting on a phase to end and another to begin.

In front of Mr Narayan was Mohar Singh, heavily built but muscular. He is dark with a sort of glow that comes from continuous exposure to the sun. What distinguished him from the rest was his moustache, the biggest in

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