

**Report on police firing in Village Jethuke, District Bhatinda, Punjab on 31.1.2000**

by

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**Background**

A dispute between the villagers led by Bhart Kisan Union (BKU) and mini bus operators was going on for many weeks over the issue of overcharging of bus fare. Villagers were demanding that bus fare be charged at the prescribed rates and the same be displayed in the buses. They alleged that the bus pliers were over charging and for that purpose they were not displaying the rates in the buses. Since 12.1.2000, the dispute became acute. The matter was reported in the daily newspapers many times. The district authorities were very well aware of the escalating situation. This dispute took an ugly turn on the evening of 31<sup>st</sup> Jan, when the negotiations between the district administration and BKU leaders failed. On this the police detained the leaders of BKU. The villagers collected at village Jethuke to seek release of their leaders.

**Incident of 31.1.2000**

**As informed by the Protesters and eye witnesses**

In the after noon of 31.1.2000, the news of detention of their leaders spread in the villages. The villagers from Jethuke, Buggar, Gill Kalan, Chotian and Jeond started collecting in Jethuke. They sat dharna on the railway track and blocked the traffic. They were demanding immediate release of their leaders. The leaders whereabouts were not disclosed to the protesters. Fearing for the safety of their leaders, they were agitated. They were using Public address system and making speeches. The police force was led by the SP (Operations) Mr. M.S. Chinna. According to eye witnesses the police team headed by the SP threatened the agitators of dire consequences if they did not stop their protest immediately. But the protesters did not bow down to their threats and continued. On this the police team went berserk and tried to snatch the addressing system of the protesters. This further agitated the demonstrators and a scuffle followed. The police force was further reinforced by teams from Bhatinda. Police started lathi charging them. and threw tear gas shells and started firing at the mob. The villagers started running towards the village. But police chased the villagers to their homes and bet them not sparing even women, kept firing and also threw stones at them. The police party kept firing late at night. Stones were thrown by the police in large number. The protesters did not have any fire arms. The injured protesters were rounded up by the police and taken to unknown places. More than 80 were missing from the village, few for the fear of the police retribution and others rounded up by the police. Villagers suspected that many

more must have been killed in the firing and taken by the police to unknown places. They had no means to know as the police did not allow them to move out. Two dalit youths were killed and 80 villagers suspected to be missing in the above episode. Many people including women showed the injuries to the team. The villagers hid in the local Gurudwara to save themselves but were chased by the policemen even inside. The men showed the injuries to the team, which were caused while scaling the wall of Gurudwara when the police party chased them inside. The Gurudwara was sealed and address system was also seized and daily Ardas was not allowed to be performed. The women compared this episode with operation blue star. Some called it worse than that on the plea that Ardas never stopped even during those gory days. Following the incident the whole village was sealed by hundreds of policemen. All this happened after about 9 PM. Many empty shells of the bullets were shown to the pressmen and the team members by the villagers, which were alleged to be found from the houses.

### **As informed by the police men**

The team met the police men injured in the episode and some others. Their version was that the police in a bid to save the situation had to open fire in the air and youth were shot accidentally. The police used extreme degree of restraint. The protesters had firearms, who had opened fire at them first. No stones were thrown by the police. No precise details were given by the police men as to how all this started. No senior police officer could be contacted due to the visit of the DGP as informed by the SSP office.

### **Observations of Insaaf and PUCL team**

The team of the Insaaf International and PUCL reached the Civil hospital Rampura Phul in the morning of 1.1.2000, where the dead bodies of the dalit youths were kept for post mortem. The team was shocked at the way the hospital was converted in to a police camp. The Deputy commissioner, SSP, SP (operation), ADC, Civil surgeon, Assistant Civil surgeon and hordes of other officers were present. The immediate family members of the deceased were under extreme stress and were sitting in one corner in front of the mortuary. They appeared under lot of pressure and were not communicative with any of the persons, team members, or media men. They were fear stricken. The dalit youths named Deshpal Singh (18) and Gurmeet Singh (22) died of bullet injuries. Gurmeet Singh is survived by his wife and two little children, younger aged about 3 years. Both had been hit in the abdomen. One of them had two bullet injuries.

None of the injured BKU activists and villagers was seen admitted in the civil hospital Rampura Phul. Their whereabouts could not be found out making role of police in their disappearance, doubtful.

The injured policemen had minor injuries except one having blunt injury on his nose and mouth. Team could not verify bullet injuries on the body of the police men alleged to have been shot at. To the team they appeared abrasions rather than the fire shots. A few

of the police men just pointed at their head when asked where they were hit but no injury could be seen.

Insaaf and PUCL team went to the village. The sight was beyond imagination. All roads to the village were surrounded by policemen. It was a village under siege. Hundreds of policemen had surrounded the village and large number was seen around the cremation ground. Some of the villagers were collected in the cremation ground and waiting for the bodies of the victims. Mr. Bhan Singh Bhora MP (CPI) and Mr. Darhan Mehraj (CPM) were there with the villagers. There was atmosphere of fear among villagers. The women were wailing uncontrollably in the houses of the deceased.

Stones were scattered in large number. Pelting of stones was also visible on the walls and doors of the houses of the village. The police has registered a FIR against the demonstrators at Bhatinda Railway police station.

### **Conclusion**

Administration totally failed to handle the situation. This unfortunate happening resulting in the loss of two precious lives could have been very easily averted if the administration had taken wise and timely steps. The issue of over charging of the bus fares by the transporters was a small matter if the administration had dealt with it sensibly.

The arrest of the BKU leaders immediately after failure of the negotiations by the police is the out come of the dictatorial, arbitrary and high handed attitude inherited from the colonial Rulers further strengthened by unlimited powers enjoyed by the police force during the period of extremism in the state. They fail to realize that people enjoy right to protest, express the dissenting views and freedom of speech in a democratic country.

Stone throwing was from both the sides. Provoked by the use of force by the police against the protesters, one of the protesters pelted the stones at the police and was joined by others when the police started lathi charging them. The police in turn threw tear gas shells, stones and started firing at the mob. On this the villagers ran helter skelter to save themselves. The policemen armed with lathis and guns chased them to their houses and Gurudwara and beat them mercilessly. They also maltreated, abused and hit women folk of the village.

Definitely it was an excessive use of force by the Bhatinda Police against the villagers. Some shots were fired in line of body, hitting the deceased in the abdomen. If the fires were either shot in the air to disperse the agitators or to incapacitate them then they would not have killed any body, hitting them in the center of the body.

The attitude of “teach them a lesson” of the law enforcing agencies resulting in ruthless suppressions of agitation of people, a democratic right, adds to the ever-increasing discontentment, anger and frustration of the people against the rulers.

**Demands**

The Insaaf International and PUCL demand: -

- A thorough and time bound investigation in to this gruesome murder of two young dalit youths and unprecedented repression on the men and women of the villages by a high court judge. Stringent punishments to the officials found guilty by the judicial inquiry
- Action against officials who let this minor dispute result in death and destruction.
- Immediate suspension of the officers responsible for this ruthless repression on the people.
- Payment of compensation to the family of the deceased and injured without any delay.
- Immediate release of the all the innocent people arrested by the police.

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