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201 President HAS SEEN . . .

# India executes two peasants — for political reasons

By Mohan Ram  
Special to  
The Christian Science Monitor  
New Delhi

India has quietly executed two peasants for political reasons — the first such punishment known to have been administered here in 25 years.

The Dec. 1 executions, coming two months after Spain incurred a storm of international protest for taking the lives of five political prisoners, went largely unnoticed for several days by outside observers. The last execution in India was that of Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Mohandas Gandhi.

The latest executions came more than 3½ years after the accused — Gunal K. Gowd, a farmer, and Jangam Bhoomaiah, a tailor — were convicted for the murder of their landlord in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

The two men were Naxalites, or members of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a Maoist-oriented group advocating "people's war" for socialism. The group was making in popularity in Andhra Pradesh at the time, and guerrilla activities were frequent.

### Executions postponed

According to evidence presented in the case, the landlord was typical of many in rural India who keep their "bonded labor" tenants and sharecroppers perpetually in debt through rough usury and sometimes force.



By R. Norman Matheny, staff photographer

### Rural India — where virtual slavery sometimes defies the law

The date of the executions was postponed twice as various groups — including jurists, Supreme Court lawyers, members of Parliament, and the Communist Party of India — entered appeals, sought reprieves, or tried to get the sentences commuted to life imprisonment.

While the two men awaited the outcome of these appeals the government of Prime

Minister Indira Gandhi twice granted amnesties to other convicted criminals — one to mark the 25th anniversary of Indian independence and the other for the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of Mahavira, founder of the Jain religion.

The final appeals for clemency were made on the basis that the two revolutionaries had acted out of a sense of injustice over the oppression of rural landlords and that this made their case different from a common crime. It also was argued that there was a growing trend against the death penalty and that Parliament already was contemplating penal-reform legislation.

The Indian Supreme Court, however, pleaded powerlessness to intervene because the law made no distinction between a political crime and an ordinary one. Said the

court, "We cannot rewrite the law, whatever our own views on urgent reforms. . . . Over the centuries society has come away from the crueler forms of legal death; an almost revolutionary change in penology has taken place in England since 1801 when a boy of 13 could be hung for stealing a spoon. Not raw ferocity but warm humanity is the heart of the law."

### Clemency pleas fail

Last-minute pleas for clemency to Prime Minister Gandhi and to President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed also failed.

Press censorship, imposed as part of the national state of emergency last June 26, seems to have played a large part in the story dropping from public view. Until then many of India's major newspapers gave it prominent coverage.

Despite laws against it, bonded labor has prevailed in parts of rural India for centuries.

It is easy for a poor peasant to become bonded by borrowing a small sum of money for an emergency or other special need. In some cases three generations of the same family have been virtual slaves because of a small amount the grandfather borrowed many years ago.

Interest on the loan is compounded at high rates, forcing the borrower — and sometimes his wife — to work for the creditor. If the wife is employed elsewhere, she has to credit her wages to her husband's account. The responsibility for repaying the debt can be passed on to the children if the borrower's lifetime labor is not sufficient to repay it.

Recently in Andhra Pradesh, government officials discovered several cases of bonded labor but were unable to prosecute the creditors because no one was willing to come forward with evidence.

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