



The Police Memorial is like a question mark on patriotism

Haunted by Memories

The small village that became a metaphor for Gandhi's obsession with non-violence during the freedom struggle is today caught between a historical disillusion and criminal violence

■ By Shefalee Vasudev

History is a burdensome luggage. People of Chauri Chaura will agree because Chauri Chaura the place became first Chauri Chaura the event in Indian history and then a metaphor for Gandhism. Today the people of the village in Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur district wonder what nationalism is all about.

On February 4, 1922 police had fired on a mob of angry peasants fighting for the freedom of their country. In retaliation, the villagers had set the police thana on fire, burning to death 23 policemen. Appalled by the violence, a disillusioned Gandhi had suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement.

On Gandhi Jayanti last week, the memorial to the satyagrahis was overrun as usual by drug addicts and *bevdas* (alcoholics), for whom the isolated monument offers a safe haven from police raids and disapproving locals. In daytime, it reverts to being a neglected monument with rusted railings and stinking, ivy-covered walls with the paint peeling off. It was the Indian peasants who made Gandhi the Mahatma. Now, it is the families of those same peasants who shrug off even a mild mention of the Mahatma.

Conflict, however, seems to live on. What still rankles is the question of who the real martyrs of 1922 were, the dis-



sonance starkly represented in the two memorials—both built to commemorate martyrs. One is at the police thana to honour the policemen who were charred to death. The other, on the opposite side of the police memorial, is for the hundreds of satyagrahis who became martyrs, a popular concession to people power made by Indira Gandhi, then the prime minister, in 1982.

Sivanand, the chowkidar at the people's testimonial, bitterly points out, "The police memorial has *Jai Hind* written on it, whereas this doesn't." Meaning, why isn't the people's act sanctified by a national slogan? So in silent discord, on February 4 every year, policemen pay homage at the police marker and the locals light candles for the civilian agitationists. On most other days, nobody looks at Chauri Chaura.

Just as well perhaps. For the entire Gorakhpur-Deoria belt is now a crime-infested area. "Violence has increased lately with daylight murders, extortions and dacoity," says a police officer at the thana. The who's who of Uttar Pradesh's underworld hail from this area. The policemen posted at the historic thana are indifferent. They shrug as if this isn't their tragedy. "It's all forgotten," says an apologetic bystander. But as a historian said, "To forget, you have to first remember the event." Gandhi Jayanti was the event. The forgetting was renewed that day. ■