

The Battle at Bokaro

The Battle at Bokaro; The Bokaro War

By Sarthak Sidhant

It's the year 1979 in India, The Year of Political Instability, Economic Challenges and Social Transformation. With these events, a major significant detail gets left out, almost every time.

It was a hot and humid June of 79 in Bokaro, a small Industrial town of Bihar was busy in the symphony of steel and smoke.

Life was going as it usually goes, but in the heart of Bokaro, The Bokaro Steel Plant, a rebellion was brewing. The thing is the Security Force managing the plant was unhappy, unhappy with the working conditions and Salary they were being given.

The BSL employed about 1800 soldiers on contractual basis, Rs. 640 was given per Jawan to the Authorities, which after deducting the expenses totalled to around Rs. 320. A Complete 50% Cut that too during a bad economical state of the state, the soldiers were scared about their future or generally about sustaining life this way. And as Baby Yoda says, Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate to suffering. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFnFr-DOPf8>)

and when people suffer, what do they do best? they revolt. We know this because of the french.

By Mid June, 35 representatives of CISF Jawans from all over India were arrested. Why? you may ask, because they didn't wear uniform at the meeting of the staff council with the union home minister. The Rebels were obviously quite angry about this, and they wanted revenge, One of the influential leaders of the Jawans, S D Majhi managed to escape custody and reach Bokaro to Organize a Protest against the arrest of leaders.

Leaflets condemning the arrest were distributed and on June 16, a procession was taken out in support of a 14-point charter of demands, some of them were:

1. immediate release of all arrested leaders
 2. the right to form associations
 3. interim relief of 200 ₹ per month
- other demands were of the same type, related to service conditions

1100 out of 1800 CISF Soldiers were now Rebels because of the popularity of the Charter, all of them participated in the processions and violent demonstrations organized on a very broad scale

Following this the DIG, CISF Bokaro, was gheraoed on the 18th. The agitating jawans began openly disobeying the senior officers and soon the effective control in the CISF barracks including the control of the armoury passed into their hands.

- Ramprasad Sengupta, Economic and Political Weekly

the main part of the processions were very basic, they just shouted slogans, participating in gheraos, participating hunger strikes and 'dharna's all this, led to questioning of the actual security in the BSL

following these developments, the IG and chief secretary of Bihar came down from Patna (Bokaro was a part of Bihar then), and compromise talks were held with the leaders of agitating jawans.

They were told that within 48 hours, the arrested leaders would be released, in turn the CISF jawans would have to give up the armoury.

Even when the compromise were taking place, the officials had made their mind, it was to forcibly disarm the CISF jawans, plans were underway.

on june 23rd, a **brigade of 3600 soldiers**, of the punjab regiment, was moved to bokaro from the ramgarh cantonment, and with sheer luck, the CISF Jawans came to know of this and prepared themselves for the challenge.

meanwhile, another attempt for the compromise was made on 24th june, where a meeting at the Bokaro club was held, and went on till 11 pm, the CISF jawans were asked to surrender their weapon before any talks, they rejected the idea of it.

let me simplify this once, there are two groups to this battle, one is the CISF's rebels and other is the BSL, government of Bihar and the Army with them, BSF.

now it was just one goal, bring the rebels down. with whatever force it takes.

remember the brigade? 900 of the 3600 were detailed about what they had to do.

around midnight, the operations began, all important locations were 'gheraod' by the army, so the CISF jawans could directly be under threat. be it the housing, the barracks, CRP units, BMP units. some refused and it was later told that one jawan was killed during the hasty removal. the army also took control of the administrative building, and its roof which overlooked the CISF barracks.

this was war for the CISF, the army was preparing to kill them, they thought.

but they were the CISF, the central industrial security force, they couldn't go down without a fight.

the CISF jawans started preparing to face the challenges, Jeeps with floodlights were stationed at important places to defend, sand bags, barricades.

i heard the leaders speaking to the CISF jawans through loudspeakers asking them to be United during such hard times. and fight with the BSF to keep control of the armoury.

- owner of a teashop situated near the CISF compound

At 2:30 am, the whole city of bokaro was plunged into darkness, this was preplanned by the officers, all the power connections were switched off.

A Major from the army, Sukhdeo Singh, approached the barracks with a loudspeaker, urging the CISF jawans inside to surrender peacefully. When his pleas were met with silence, he moved closer, only to be fatally shot. An army doctor, Captain Palkhiwala, rushed to the Major's aid but was also injured, though he later recovered.

This tragic event triggered a fierce exchange of gunfire between the two forces. The CISF jawans, well-fortified within their barracks, held their ground. The army, eager to resolve the conflict before the arrival of factory workers at daybreak, intensified their efforts. Around 5:30 AM, mortar shells rained down on the armoury building where the CISF jawans were concentrated, eventually forcing their surrender.

The aftermath of this clash was grim. While newspapers reported 23 to 26 casualties, the actual death toll was likely much higher. Witness accounts from workers trapped in the compound suggested a staggering number of bodies. An army officer estimated the total deaths at 48, but relatives of the fallen CISF jawans alleged many were killed after surrendering. The Bokaro general hospital recorded 107 admissions, primarily CISF jawans, many of whom succumbed to their injuries or faced amputations.

Despite the army's efforts, a number of CISF jawans managed to escape the siege, either due to their familiarity with the barracks' layout or their absence during the initial conflict. In the following days, some returned to duty under the promise of continued employment and potential rewards for cooperation in recovering missing arms.

The lack of public response to the tragedy was notable. Even with unions calling for strikes, the city's factory workers and employees remained largely uninvolved. This silence might have been due to the CISF jawans not actively seeking public support, further isolating them during the conflict.

Despite the heavy losses and the crushing of their agitation, the remaining CISF jawans held onto hope. They believed their organization remained active elsewhere and the fight would continue. The incident also revealed a growing sense of solidarity amongst various police forces, as seen in the refusal of some units to fire upon the CISF jawans.

The events in Bokaro left a lasting impact. The tragic incident of an army jawan discovering his own brother among the dead served as a stark reminder of the human cost of conflict.

I find it weird that this is not discussed more, its a reminder of how forces can fight against each other, even with the same motive, the same heart, in the same country.

“The Battle at Bokaro.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 28, 1979, pp. 1151–53. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4367777>. Accessed 5 July 2024.

[Wikipedia Article](#)