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At least 11 people have been killed in the northern Indian state of Bihar in what appears to be the latest outbreak of caste violence in the region.

The victims - all upper-caste Hindus - were killed when a group of around 50 armed men surrounded their village in the district of Nawada and fired indiscriminately.

Police say this latest attack appears to be in retaliation for the murder of five lower-caste Hindus in the same district on Saturday.

The attack took place at dawn, as gunmen opened fire on the villagers, which included women and children.

Seven people were injured in the attack, which took place 170 km south of the state capital, Patna.

The victims were all members of a feudal, land-owning caste, the Bhumihars.

A BBC correspondent says, however, that in this case, the villagers were poor farmers whose economic status was not very different from lower-caste peasants in the region.

**Caste wars**

Maoist rebel groups are active in the Bihar countryside and often lend their support to landless farmers in their feud with upper-caste farmers.

Last week, five farm workers of the low-caste Yadav community were murdered in broad daylight, in an attack blamed on a private army belonging to upper-caste farmers.

Our correspondent says caste wars in Bihar have become more common after a major shift in the balance of power in the state.

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▶ The BBC's  
Satish Jacob in  
Delhi

"Caste politics  
and caste wars in  
Bihar are very  
complicated"

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Lower and middle-caste Hindus now have greater representation in the Bihar Government and the state's Chief Minister, Rabri Devi, belongs to the Yadav community.

As a result of the constant violence, Bihar is often described as India's most lawless state.

"Criminals are ruling the roost in Bihar and the administration remains a mute spectator," said Sushil Mody, an opposition politician in the state.

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