

A Killing Habit

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Extra-judicial executions are taking a variety of new forms in our State. With the naxalites it always used to be, and continues to be, a sudden act of aggression in the wilderness, leading invariably to the death of the aggressor. That format is employed also in the case of suspects in offences of dacoity and robbery, but novel versions are some times heard. One is death-while-attempting-to-escape, and the other is death-on-the-very-evening-of-successful-escape.

Rights activists have been cautioning from the beginning that encounters are not merely the concern of naxalites and their political sympathizers but everybody's, for this reason if none else, that bad practices in the exercise of power spread fast unlike good practices. Perhaps the warning sounded like rhetoric at first but now it is coming true. We are seeing cases of undertrials being taken from prison to Court – or from one prison to another – under police escort getting killed on the way, the explanation being that the undertrial grabbed the weapon of an escort policemen and opened fire on the escort party in the course of the attempt to escape, necessitating the opening of fire upon him in self-defence.

A more recent innovation is the story of suspected dacoits securely locked up in a police station running away one early morning taking some police weapons with them, and later getting killed when they turn those very weapons upon the police search party that usually – and quite miraculously – closes in upon them within twelve to twenty hours.

That these are all cases of suspects in custody being taken out and shot dead in cold blood is a suspicion that is yet to be cogently answered by the police. This suspicion arises not merely in the minds of Rights activists, but common people as well. It is important to say this because police officers speaking 'off the record' admit that they indulge in homicide in what they believe to be 'deserving' cases, and that it is only the politically motivated Rights activists who find fault with them. The recent killing of five suspects described for effect as 'Stuartpuram dacoits' – though not one of them belonged to that settlement – near Amalapuram is a case that disproves this smug assumption. Even Rights activists were surprised at the vehemence with which neighbouring residents – ordinary householders all – questioned that story put out by the police.

It is of course true that the place where that killing took place is not very much crime-prone, but that only shows that not merely 'politically motivated' Rights activists, but even ordinary people, unless their perception is distorted by fear of recurrent crime, do

not accept the view of the police that the power to indulge in extra-judicial executions is an essential instrument in the hands of the police if peace and order are to be safeguarded. Law and the Constitution apart, this assumption does not answer the very reasonable lay person's doubt as to how the police – or any one for that matter – can be trusted to identify the 'right' person to be killed. Even Courts that follow an elaborate, open and transparent procedure in determining guilt are known to err, and that is one of the reasons why even judicial death penalty is opposed. How can the purely private satisfaction of a police officer be trusted? This is quite apart from the well-founded suspicion that the decision may very well be influenced by considerations much worse than mere mistakes of assessment.

It is perhaps no coincidence that this spread of extra-judicial executions of non-naxalite suspects to all corners of the State – we have seen such killings taking place in a somewhat systematic manner in Prakasam, Kurnool, East Godavari and Ranga Reddy districts in recent years – has taken place through officers who first cut their teeth in Telangana. The first lesson they have learnt is that the gun is superior to the law, and like all 'truths' that reinforce power, it has stuck fast in their habits. What began as an 'excess' justified in the name of an exigency has become first a habit of some officers and then a habit of policing in our State. Will public conscience wake up at least now, or will it continue to slumber because dacoits are even less popular with the makers of public opinion than naxalites?

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