

Gathering information at gun point
(Fatal fear of interrogation)

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People have been committing suicides at an astonishing frequency these days to avoid police torture.

Such suicides have not been unknown in the past, but never at this frequency. Between the months of April and August this year, eleven such cases have been reported in the daily newspapers. They range across the State from Nellore to Medak, but the majority are from Telangana: one case each from the districts of Khammam, Warangal, Medak, Karimnagar, Mahbubnagar and three from Ranga Reddy.

As may be expected, three of the Telangana deaths are naxalite-related. The victims are not themselves naxalites, but they committed suicide to avoid police 'interrogation' about naxalites. The most pathetic story is that of Lingampalli Ashaiah (45) of Vattimalla, an interior village in the forests of Yellareddypet mandal of Karimnagar district. His 13 year old daughter is said to have joined the People's War, and the police started harassing Lingaiah to get her back. One can – nay, must – doubtless take objection to the People's War recruiting such young people into its armed fold, well before they have reached an age where they can exercise any rational discretion, but the police had no business to force poor Lingaiah to somehow or the other get the girl back. He committed suicide, unable to bear this pressure, on 4th August. But not all, or even a majority, are naxalite-related cases.

These are not custodial deaths, but deaths impelled by fear of impending interrogation. What makes people take such an extreme step? Take the Nellore case. There was a theft of prawns at a prawn farm at Ekatidibba in Indukurupet mandal. Even if the prawns were export-worthy tiger prawns, the value of the loss would certainly not cross the five figure mark. Yet the fear of police 'interrogation' is such that four labourers – two couples -working in the vicinity consumed pesticide to kill themselves, and three of the four died. Why were they so scared? They belong to the Yanadi community, a 'denotified tribe' that is the first suspect in all thefts and robberies in Nellore district. Such omnibus suspicion of an entire community is impermissible in the scheme of the Constitution that we have, not to speak of common human ethics, but no matter, the police have their own unwritten Constitution and their own code of ethics. The saddest part is that the victims of this perversity are the most handicapped of the plains tribals of our State.

Can the increase of such deaths be attributed to increasing cruelty of policing in our State? I would not be surprised if that were true. After all, mere fear of physical violence cannot impel a person to take his/her life unless the violence is of an absolutely unbearable character. There was

a time when it used to be said that with increasing education in the police force, violence and cruelty would go down. This has turned out to be a totally misplaced hope. Perhaps it was not even hope, but the misplaced faith our brahminical society places on book learning. It is not that educational levels in the police have not gone up. They have. But cruelty has not gone down. If any thing, the old type of not highly educated policeman would regard talk of the rights of suspects as a respect-worthy, if impractical, pastime of the 'intelligensia'. Today's educated police officer, who thinks he is no less of an intellectual than anybody else, has utter contempt for such considerations.

A few days ago the Press quoted the Home Minister as saying that all suspects would be hereafter kept in the custody of officers of the rank Sub-Divisional Police Officer (commonly known as DSP), and lesser policemen would be able to take them for interrogation only with the knowledge and leave of the custodian. But after the antics of the Superintendents of Police of Guntur, Warangal and Ranga Reddy districts, who let themselves be videographed thrashing rowdy-sheeters in the name of 'counseling' them, does any one honestly believe that higher police officials are more respectful of the law and the rights of the people? The undeniable truth about Andhra Pradesh is that this is a State where officers of the IPS cadre personally indulge in torture and extra-judicial killing. Such a State can hardly control violation of suspects' rights by lower police personnel, assuming for a moment that there is some rule of human behaviour which says that personnel lower in the official scale are more prone to misbehaviour.

But suspects are not alone in facing torture at the hands of the police. Many of those who committed suicide this year were called to the police station as witnesses, not as suspects. It is true that the law requires that witnesses to an offence must cooperate with the investigation, but not on pain of violence.

None of these facts is unknown to the Government that rules the State. Periodically, the Home Minister, the Chief Minister and the Director General of Police are quoted in the Press as saying that they will not tolerate extra-legal acts of the police personnel. That is fine. But mere expression of displeasure has never stopped any one from committing crimes. Or shall we try that experiment with other criminals, too? Instead of criminal prosecution of dacoits, why don't we have once-a-month expression of displeasure by the Home Minister?

The simple fact is that toleration of crimes by police personnel – what is called impunity in the parlance of international law – is a matter of policy with our rulers. So long as that continues to be the case, violence upon people called to the police station can only keep increasing, and no wonder then that not only do suspects die in police custody, but people called merely to give information take their own lives to avoid the ordeal of becoming witnesses at gun point.

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