

Creating 'Terrorists'

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(Judge: The papers on my table show he is not Mukhtar. So what is his real name?

Officer: He is actually Aftab Alam Ansari.

Judge: That means you have arrested a wrong person. How can this horrible blunder take place?

The officer stayed silent.

Judge: If he is neither Mukhtar nor Raju, why did not you write that in the petition clearly? Have you written that? Please underline that and show it to me.

As the officer began scanning the petition, he looked puzzled.

Judge: I'm not going to accept this petition. Please go and make a fresh one.)

Aftab Alam Ansari, an electrician with a power company in Kolkatta, is finally free. And the ordeal through which he had to go through as a 'terrorist' is finally over. Recently he met with the Chief Minister of Bengal to apprise him of the whole situation and seek help for his mother's frail health.

It is now history how he was arrested from Baranagar in Kolkatta on 27th November '07 with Bengal police's help supposedly for 'ferrying the entire cache of explosives for the November blasts in UP'.

It is now revealed that the Special Task Force of the UP Police had been set on Aftab's trail by a claim by two arrested militants - Mohamad Khalid and Tariq Quazmi - that the mastermind of the court blasts in the state called himself Aftab as well as Mukhtar, Raju and Bangladeshi. The duo however, had mentioned no middle name or surname.

Though Aftab is now free, Ayesha Begum—Aftab's mother has other worries staring in her eyes. Whether they would be able to live a normal life and would ever be able to get out of the 'stigma' attached to the whole operation and Aftab's brief sojourn in Jail.

It is now clear that Aftab's arrest by the overenthusiastic UP STF was a case of mistaken identity as he also hailed from Gorakhpur like the ringleader of the November blast and also shared his nickname 'Mukhtar'.

But now that Aftab, an innocent citizen of, this country is free at last, will it be OK to say that the tragedy which befell Aftab would be the last one of its kind. And henceforth no Aftab living on this part of the earth would ever be traumatised in a similar manner. Looking at the track record of the Indian police and the bigotry and sectarianism of the powers that be it would be dishonesty to make any such grand claim.

In fact the day the news of Aftab's freedom in jail appeared, one came across the strictures passed by the Maharashtra high court against the Maharashtra police's arbitrariness in handling the Khwaja Yunus case. It is now history how Khwaja Yunus, a Gulf returned software engineer, was arrested by the police on December 27, 2002 and booked under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, in connection with the Ghatkopar blast. On January 7, 2003 Yunus was found dead amidst police claims that he had escaped after the vehicle in which he was being escorted to Aurangabad had met with an accident. Later it was revealed that Yunus was tortured to death by some police officers. After persistent protests by

human rights activists about this custodial death and struggle for justice launched by Yunus's mother Aasiya Begum, FIR was lodged against the guilty policemen. Of course the dillydallying on part of the Maharashtra government continued unabated. The high court's query was simple 'Why were ten top police officers initially named by CID for their alleged involvement in the custodial death of Yunus let off?'

While Aftab is finally a free man, Mohammad Moarif Qamar and Irshad Ali, two residents of Delhi seem to be not so lucky even after languishing in jail for more than two years. Both of them were victims of a well-planned conspiracy hatched by the Special Cell of the Delhi Police in collaboration with the intelligence bureau operatives. CBI found to its dismay that IB officials colluded with Delhi police personnel to 'plant' RDX on these youths who were arrested as 'Al Badr' terrorists. While Qamar was abducted from his Bhajanpura residence on Dec 22, 2005 itself, Irshad Ali had gone missing from his Sultanpuri home 10 days earlier. Their relatives had informed the police about their sudden disappearance. On February 9, 2006 the family members were told that both had been arrested with 2kg RDX and pistols. It was clear that they were kept in illegal detention by the special cell all this while. One can just imagine if the high courts had not intervened in the case and directed the CBI to look into the matter, the 'terrorist' label on both these youths would have stuck to them all their lives.

May it be the case of Aftab or for that matter Khwaja Yunus, or Mohammad Qamar, Irshad Ali—it is becoming increasingly clear that framing of innocents and branding them as terrorist is the latest norm among lawkeepers of the country. Of course anyone familiar with the Indian situation may easily notice the continuity in the rampant misuse of various laws of detention and confinement. Post 9/11 a significant change has occurred in the whole process. It is for everyone to see that Muslims as a community are increasingly becoming the target of criminalisation and terrorisation.

To be very frank, in all such cases it is difficult to differentiate whether the people are ruled by forces of the 'programmatically communalist' variety (like the BJP or Shiv Sena) or the 'pragmatic communalists' like Congress.

It then becomes impossible to forget Mohammad Afroz, who was arrested after 9/11 by the Mumbai police and was charged for planning a terrorist attack. It was told to the pliant media then that this 'dreaded terrorist' wanted to crash a plane piloted by him on the British House of Commons and Australia. A special team from Mumbai police especially went to these countries but could not bring back any evidence. Ultimately it took the whole charge as a grand fabrication. It was a time when Maharashtra was ruled by a 'Secular front' which comprised parties like Congress and NCP.

The 'dreaded terrorists' arrested in connection with the five-year-old attack on the Raghunath temple in Jammu also faced similar ordeal. The courts finally absolved all the accused of any charges and advised the police to properly use its minds in handling sensitive cases of such nature. These innocent people had to languish in jail for such a long period for no fault of theirs.

It is worth noting that despite many such fiascos the powers that be never attempt to draw any important lesson to avoid recurrence of such incidents. On the contrary, the whole attempt is to 'individualise' all such cases and proceed

with the established practice of stigmatisation and brutalisation of the social and religious minorities.

It is high time that they are told about the way the Canadian government handled similar case.

Canadian-Syrian Mahel Arar - a young software engineer - was seized by CIA operatives during a stopover at New York in 2002 and was secretly sent to Syria. Lodged in a grave like cell in Syria, Arar was repeatedly tortured to extract information which he did not know. Ultimately his tormentors released him within a span of year and a half without ever being charged with a crime. Looking back it is clear that Mahel Arar became a victim of the Islamophobia manufactured by the likes of Bush-Blair in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Last year Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada sought public apology for the ordeal which Maher went through and for the role played by Canadian officials in the whole affair . The Canadian government also gave him nine million dollars as compensation. Mr Harper said in full public view of the media "On behalf of the government of Canada, I wish to apologize to you, Monia Mazigh (Arar's wife) and your family for any role Canadian officials may have played in the terrible ordeal that all of you experienced in 2002 and 2003."

Is anyone listening? □□□