

THE 'DEAD' STORY

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(Governments have always lied. They naturally deny it, even long after it is abundantly clear that they have lied, trailing multiple red herrings, dismissing inconvenient evidence, implying that there is counter-evidence they are not free to produce. When a lie can no longer be credibly denied it is justified, usually by an appeal to the national interest. Governments of modern representative democracies are no different, even if they are more liable than dictators to be exposed.

—Colin Leys,
Quoted in Socialist Register, 2006)

The National Capital Region (NCR) witnessed a police encounter on the eve of the republic day. Two young men who were supposedly carrying a big cache of arms and ammunition were killed on the spot. It was told that this duo was part of a larger LeT module which wanted to wreak havoc in the capital.

The killings of the two young men did not cause much uproar.

The police officers appeared jubilant over this episode for foiling such attempt. To blunt any possible criticism of the incident a due enquiry was also ordered by the powers that be and have even promised that it would be completed in a stipulated time.

A nation which is still coming to terms with the terrorist attack in Bombay, which saw deaths of more than 200 innocents largely remained silent over this encounter. One could even say that it was a reflection of the tremendous sense of fatigue among the masses about such incidents. Another interpretation of the silence could be the emerging consensus among the articulate sections of the society which proudly says that human rights are for humans, not for 'terrorists'. A senior judge of the Supreme Court had given vent to similar feelings in a public meeting recently when he had said that "...[a] terrorist is not fit to be called a human. He is an animal so what is required is animal rights." (*Indian Express*, 28 Jan 2009)

The only consolation to this otherwise bloody episode was that few conscientious journalists including some civil rights activists tried to look beyond the official truth. They were perplexed to find that the 'terrorists' were killed in the same lonely and uninhabited area which had witnessed two encounters in a span of one month, and despite the heavy exchange of fire between the ATS team and the terrorists, only one cop suffered minor injury on his hand whereas the terrorists received four bullets each. A newspaper like '*Times of India*' (26th January 2009) plainly posed all these 'curious questions'.

Questioning the ATS version which stated that the terrorists were chased on a 25 km stretch and then shot, it asked why did not the ATS alerted the three police posts on the way during this 'chase' and why were there not bullet marks on the car carrying the terrorists despite the 'heavy exchange of fire' ? The reporter also expressed surprise over the fact and despite being on an undercover operation, the 'terrorists' were carrying a Pakistani passport.

Another daily also deemed it necessary to express disagreements over the official truth. In its first editorial 'Encounters' begs answers of UP police' *Mail Today* (27 Jan 2009) wrote:

"To begin with, we would have been a wee bit surprised had the police not produced some "terrorists" - slain or alive - in the run-up to the Republic day. For the past many years, encounters and arrests have been as regular as the official ceremony on these occasions."

Questioning few other oddities which 'don't fit so well' it ended with a sombre note : " What surprises in no less measure is their 'confession'. If the police story is to be believed, the terrorists confessed - after they had received four bullets each - how they had come to India and what they intended to do before they succumbed to their injuries. Who tells stories while at death's door, and in such detail ?"

One can see for oneself that there is a sense of *deja vu* with whatever was being said as the official version about this encounter. In fact the newspapers are awash with the recent developments in the 'Singha-varam encounter in Chhatisgarh which had witnessed merciless killing of 15 ordinary tribals by a joint team of security personnel and Special Police Officers (SPOs).

Perhaps it would be opportune to know that the SPOs are nothing but ordinary civilians who have been asked or coerced to join the counterinsurgency operations. Apart from arming them the state also pays them some money at regular intervals.

Looking back it is clear that this encounter killings of 'dreaded naxalites' (as it was earlier called) would have similarly joined countless other similar killings if a group of social activists (belonging to *Vanvasi Chetna Ashram*) alongwith a few journalists had not decided to act. In fact they refused to buy the official version and persisted in their efforts to know the other side of the story. Responding to a PIL filed by these people the high court also issued notices to the high level police officials to appear before it to explain the incident.

It is difficult to say what would happen next in the case ? It is possible that after giving patient hearing the courts may decide to 'dump the case' as any revelations would supposedly 'harm national interest' or would 'weaken the morale of the police'. A faint hope is that the courts may yet decide to act against the guilty police personnel.

Whatever may happen in this case but that won't erase the fact that each and every state, each and every city, in fact each and every police station in the country would have countless such stories to tell about the barbarity and brutality of the force which is supposed to guarantee life and liberty of the people. And despite the near consensus among a large section of the vocal citizenry about the 'uselessness' in raising doubts over such killings still there would be people/formations/organisations who would raise their voice of dissent and yell 'I differ'. □