

THE KARKARE CONTROVERSY

Villain in Life, Hero in Death!

Subhash Gatade

Sources who were close to Karkare have said there was indeed a threat perception at that time and the former ATS chief was disturbed over allegations against his family after the Malegaon probe was made public.

However, they said "Karkare was not scared" and that "he was very practical and took adequate measures to ensure his family was safe". According to sources, Karkare had raised the wall around his house just a week before his death and also brought home a dog. "The wall was raised around the garage-end of the house, as it faced the road outside," sources said. An officer, who did not wish to be identified, said, "Soon after the probe, there were news reports alleging various things about his family which disturbed him. He was not scared for his life nor was he the kind to be afraid of consequences of an honest probe. ...It was the allegations against his family that disturbed him and he took practical measures to ensure their safety."

(Express Posted : Tue, Dec 14, 2010, 03.31 hrs Mumbai)

There are occasions when countries which are called democracies which claim to have a free media and transparency at the administrative levels fail to uncover assassinations or deaths of a political nature. Enquiries are held, investigations are done, reports are filed but after the whole exercise is done there seems no light to be emerging at the end of the tunnel.

Look at USA, the mightiest democracy on the face of the earth, and the assassination of its then President John Kennedy roughly fifty years back. Sometime back there was a report in a section of the media about the new disclosures in the case. It was said that apart from CIA itself, Kennedy's two successors Johnson and Nixon had a hand in the killing. Close watcher of the trajectory of the case would tell people that it was the *nth* theory which is being pedalled about the assassination.

Coming to India, it appears that perhaps a similar fate awaits the killing of Hemant Karkare, the indomitable head of Anti-Terrorist Squad of Maharashtra, who had led the investigations into the infamous Malegaon bomb blast (September 2008) and helped unearth the vast Hindutva terror network in the country which had in fact made inroads in the Indian military also. It need be mentioned here that Karkare was killed in the night of 26/11 (26th Nov 2008) when Mumbai came under a terror attack at the behest of Lashkar-e-Toiba with a double agent of CIA-LeT namely David Headley facilitating the operation.

Questions over the manner in which this committed officer died on duty alongwith two of his colleagues have been raised not only by his family members but politicians as well as different social activists also. It is to be noted that the judiciary also found merit in the arguments put forward by few amongst them. It was not for nothing that the Bombay High Court division bench of Justices B H Marlapalle and U D Salvi, had admitted two petitions which alleged that Karkare's death during 26/11 attacks was a result of a conspiracy hatched by Hindu extremists. Looking at the fact that '...such theories had been put out by many people,' the court wanted "some responsible officer from police department" to file a reply. (Karkare death; HC seeks CP's reply on plea alleging conspiracy, ITGD Bureau, Mumbai, October 20, 2010 Updated 20:09 IST). Not very long ago the issue of circumstances before Karkare's death reached headlines when during a book release function Digvijay Singh, the ex-Chief Minister of MP shared with the audience his alleged talk with Karkare few hours

before his death. According to Singh two hours before the first terrorists struck that evening Karkare called him to say that his life was "blighted by constant threats" from those opposed to his probe into the Malegaon blast in which Hindu extremists were accused. (*Indian Express*, 11th Dec 2010). Digvijay Singh later clarified that as far as Karkare's death was concerned he believes that terrorists from Pakistan were responsible for it.

The Hindutva organisations did not take the statement by Digvijay Singh lightly and there was an uproar in the Saffron camp over these remarks. Few overenthusiastic workers from the Parivar also burnt effigies of Singh. The overwhelming tone in the Saffron camp was that Singh's statement 'has given much leverage to terrorists elements like Taliban, LeT and ISI'. The Shiv Sena slammed Congress general secretary Digvijay Singh and his party for "going insane" and making baseless allegations against Hindu outfits. In the editorial comment in its mouthpiece *Saamna*, the party said Singh and the Congress were capitalising on the martyrdom of slain ATS chief Hemant Karkare "because it is a question of Muslim sentiments". Congress Party which has developed an uncanny ability of ducking tough questions on secularism and avoiding taking principled stand on the anti-communal struggle, officially distanced itself from this statement made by one of its senior leaders. Any careful reading of Singh's statement would have helped the party take the battle against communalism in the enemy camp which it smartly avoided. Interestingly few Congress leaders from UP did support Singh's argument and appealed for a balanced reading of his statement.

Whether the 'proof' of Singh's conversation with Karkare is available or not, it does not seem to be an important question. Important issue is whether Hemant Karkare was under tremendous pressure from majoritarian formations and parties or not, about the pace of the investigations into the Malegaon bomb blast.

Testimonies of Karkare's friends or reports filed by journalists after his death can be a good input to know his situation during the last days of his hectic life. It need be noted here that Karkare had taken over as the ATS chief in January 2008 after a seven-year stint with India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing.

MUMBAI: Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) chief Hemant Karkare, killed by terrorists who ravaged Mumbai, was a disturbed man in the days leading to his death because of endless attacks on him over the Malegaon bombing probe, police officers who knew him well said. Former Mumbai police chief Julio Ribeiro and retired police officer Sudhakar Suradkar both said that Karkare was not his usual self near the Cama hospital while going to take on terrorists on Wednesday night. Calling Karkare a "rare officer", Ribeiro said that in the brief period he had known him, he could see that Karkare was "troubled with attacks on him by political parties". Karkare, a 1982 batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, was investigating the Sep 29 bomb blasts in Maharashtra's Malegaon town that were blamed on Hindu radicals. Hindu activists blasted Karkare for arresting an army officer and a Hindu ascetic, accusing the officer of anti-Hindu bias.

Added Sudhakar: "During the morning walks I often met Hemant. He seemed quite disturbed and hurt. Perhaps he was under mental stress. Unfounded and false implications had rattled him leaving him disillusioned." (Karkare was disturbed before his death: Colleagues, IANS. Sunday, November 30, 2008 15:19 1ST)

The Indian express reporter had filed this story the very next day of his killing. ' ..as the probe unravelled the alleged plot and the role of some Hindu leaders, the case got caught in the politics of terror and the ATS was at the centre of charges that it was being used as a tool to target the Sangh Parivar amid allegations of illegal detention and torture by some of the 11 arrested for the blast. The BJP, RSS and VHP leaders, among others from the Hindu nationalist brigade, accused the ATS of being on a witch-hunt, with some even demanding

that ATS officers be subjected to a narco-analysis to establish their motives.No less a leader than the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate, L K Advani, had demanded a change in the ATS team and a judicial inquiry into the torture allegations made by Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur, a key suspect in the Malegaon case.

The Shiv Sena too had come out in support of the suspects and had threatened in its mouthpiece *Saamna* that it would publish the names of some ATS officers and shame them as it said they had tortured the Malegaon suspects.

That Karkare was affected by this was apparent when journalists met him at his office on Tuesday to get an update on the probe, less than 36 hours before he was killed. 'The Indian Express' has decided to break the confidence of what was an off-the-record conversation in an attempt to highlight the anguish of the investigators over the currents in which the Malegaon probe was getting caught as well as the larger debate over the politics of terror.

"I don't know why this case has become so political," was one of Karkare's first comments. "The pressure is tremendous and I am wondering how to extricate it from all the politics."

Was the pressure telling on the investigation, what with someone who could be the next prime minister of the country questioning the credibility of the ATS?

"Of course," was the answer. "We are being very very careful. In fact, when we want to question a suspect and if he or she has any Hindutva-wadi connections, we make sure once, twice, thrice, that we have enough reason and evidence to even question. Normally it is not like that. We are able to freely question anyone we suspect."

...The previous evening, hours after the meeting, TV channels had 'breaking news' that he had received a fresh death threat from some unidentified caller, apparently in connection with the Malegaon probe.

(Karkare's response to a death threat : A 'smiley', Y P Rajesh, Posted: Thursday , Nov 27, 2008 at 1637 hrs, Indian Express)

It was worth noting that reporter from *Tehelka* also discussed the last days of Karkare emphasising the pressures brought on him by the ring leaders of the Hindutva brigade. '*Saamna*' the mouthpiece of Shiv Sena and other Hindutva publications had been carrying on a vilification campaign against him since it became known that he would not yield to any pressure. *Saamna* stated 'we spit on Karkare who is investigating this case'.These organisations had even called for a Bombay bandh supposedly to expose the 'witch hunt' against the Hindus at the hands of ATS. And the terrorist attack and death of Hemant Karkare immediately changed the situation. If Karkare was villain for them the previous day, he became a 'martyr' the very next day for sacrificing his life during the terrorist attack.

*Parivar doublespeak : Villain in life, hero in death *29 Nov 2008, 0102 hrs 1ST, ET Bureau MUMBAI)

The heroic death of Maharashtra's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) chief Hemant Karkare in counter-terror operations has left the BJP-Shiv Sena combine with egg on its face. The other day Narendra Modi, BJP's poster-boy chief minister and Hindutva mascot, paid lofty tributes to Karkare and other senior cops who lost their lives in the counter attack. But before his death on duty, Mr Karkare and his colleagues at the ATS were at the receiving end of almost a slanderous attack not only by BJP and Shiv Sena leaders, but also by several Sangh Parivar organisations for the ongoing ATS probe into the Malegaon blasts. In fact, Mr Modi himself had attacked the ATS for the "biased" probe into the Malegaon blasts. So much so

that the BJP and Sangh Parivar organisations had personally blamed Karkare for what they claimed "implicating the Hindu religious leaders and outfits" in the probe. But the two parties are now singing eulogies to the valour demonstrated by the departed ATS chief.

Ironically, the Shiv Sena had even called a Maharashtra bandh on December 1 to protest against the ATS probe and express solidarity with the accused—Sadhvi Pragya Singh and lieutenant colonel Shrikant Purohit—for their involvement in the Malegaon blasts.

Narendra Modi, who had accused Hemant Karkare of being a 'desh drohi', a traitor—a few days back, which can carry a death penalty in India—had no qualms in going to visit the bereaved family with an offer of financial assistance.

It was a different matter that Kavita, the indomitable life partner of Hemant Karkare, who was witness to the turmoil in her husband's life for pursuing call of his duty without prejudice towards anyone, not only refused to meet 'Hindu Hriday Samrat' Mr Modi but also declined to take any financial assistance from him.

Psychologists or psychiatrists talk of a condition/ailment called amnesia afflicting an individual. It is a condition in which memory is disturbed or lost. Interestingly psychologists also talk of social amnesia which is a collective forgetting by people. Experts also say that social consciousness can be subjected to a forced amnesia, by means of a system ideological processing and ideological pressure. Fascism and Totalitarianism, which are clear examples of twentieth century, can be evidence of this.

Coming to the Indian context it would not be an exaggeration to say that one witnesses such 'collective forgetting' among members of Hindutva brigade. These are the same people who derided the freedom fighters, kept themselves aloof from the anti-colonial struggle, praised the ethnic cleansing of Jews by Hitler, abused Gandhi (and even created conditions for his assassination), humiliated Ambedkar when alive and so on and today without offering any apologies to the lapses are trying to emerge as the true inheritors of the freedom struggle and real followers of Gandhi, Ambedkar as well as other martyrs to the cause of independence. The present controversy around Maharashtra ATS chief Hemant Karkare's last days once again corroborates the fact that the malaise of social amnesia runs quite deep in the Hindutva brigade. Forget decades, they seem to be collectively forgetting, (or one should say do not want to remember) things which happened just one-two years back. □