

Where the Hell Meets the Earth

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On 2nd may, 2012, it was 5 O'clock in the evening. This writer and others entered into the general ward of Orthopedics Department of the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS), Ranchi. After a long search, 40-year-old Sylvester Minj was found ; lying on the bed. His son Roshan was sitting on the other side of the bed and eying on his father with hopeless sight. Another caretaker, Sylvester's cousin brother M Minj was sleeping on the ground near his bed. As soon as we approached them, they became alert. And after seeing us with pen, notepad and camera in hands, they took us for guaranteed as we are Journalists. Sylvester was not able to turn his head in either side of bed as his head was tied up with the bed's frame straightly. Since, he wants the world to know about the ordeal he underwent through therefore, he is ready to response each and every question whoever asks him. He is one of the unfortunate villagers, whom the Security forces brutally tortured on April 5. His only crime is : he happens to be a cousin brother of late Lucas Minj, whom the forces had killed in a cold-blood murder and buried on the bank of Koel River during anti-Naxal operation on January 31.

Meanwhile, Sylvester started narrating us about the nightmare he faced. He comes from an Adivasi family and lives with his wife Susanna, two sons and three daughters in a village called 'Khambhikhas (Karamdih)' that comes under Barwadih police station in Laterhar district of Jharkhand. He owns some patches of land, which is the major source of their livelihood. Besides, they also collect minor forest produce and go for daily wage as well. On 5th April, 2012, it was about 3 O'clock in the afternoon, when Sylvester was returning to his native village from Chhipa-dohar by a passenger Jeep. The Commander Jeep is in common used as passenger vehicle for local travel in the region. There were more than 25 passengers including men, women and children in the Jeep. Since the region is known as Naxal infested area, therefore the CRPF and COBRA Jawans of 'Labra Police Picket' were patrolling near Bahuda Ghat. They stopped the Jeep and asked the driver to show his driving license. Since, the driver had no license therefore, he could not show them. Thereafter, they asked the passengers to vacate the vehicle and kneel down on the ground for half-an-hour.

Meanwhile, they started asking all the passengers about their locations and came to know about Sylvester being the cousin brother of late Lucas Minj. The Jawans are annoyed with Lucas' family members and other villagers, precisely, because they have filed a murder case against them in Barwadih police station. They asked Sylvester to come over the road. They caught him and put his head on the ground and asked him to keep his leg straight up in the air. He was kept in that position for half-an-hour. After a while, the CRPF Jawans called the COBRA Jawans, who were standing at some distance, and brief them about Sylvester's relationship with Lucas. Immediately, the COBRA Jawan became angry like real cobra snake and kicked in his neck. Consequently, Sylvester fell down on the ground and became unconscious. The Jawans were afraid assuming that he might die. Therefore, they poured water on his head till,

he returned to the normal condition. When he got back to consciousness, he was screaming due to pain.

Finally, they put him into the Jeep and asked the other passengers to board into the vehicle and let them go. However, the driver was afraid therefore, he stopped the vehicle in a place called Patradih, where Sylvester got down and laid on the ground as he was not able to sit down due to pain. Meanwhile, his sister-in-law Shanti who is a nurse by profession reached the spot by chance. She was shocked to see his brother-in-law screaming with pain. She brought injection and medicine from a nearby medical shop immediately and injected him. After some time, Sylvester got relief and went to his home.

After a few days, when Sylvester was not able to overcome the pain in his neck, he went to Daltenganj for treatment. However, he knew that no Doctor would be ready to treat him if he tells the truth therefore; he informed the Doctor that he had fallen down in a well. Finally, Dr Arun Shukla got ready to treat him and asked him to get the X-ray of his neck. The X-ray report revealed about the damage of a bone of his neck. After seeing the report, the Doctor advised him to get admitted to the Rajendra Institute of Medical Science (RIMS), Ranchi for further treatment. Hence, Sylvester was admitted to the RIMS, Ranchi on April 20. However, he was not aware till we exposed that Kranti Kumar Gardeshi, the Superintendent of Police (Latehar), has deployed his cousin brother M Minj in an official duty as his caretaker. He was stunned to know about it. He says, "I never knew this. I thought since he is my cousin brother therefore he has come to look after me in the hospital after taking a leave." Though, Sylvester does not know that how long he would have to be in the Hospital but he worries about his family members, who might face the same torture in the village.

Sylvester is not only one unfortunate brother of late Lucas who faced brutal torture but Lucas's elder brother William Minj is also in the queue, who was also tortured by the CRPF and COBRA Jawans on April 5. The Jawans went to Nawarnago village in the morning and caught William alleging him as an informer of the CPI-(Maoist). They abused him, kicked on his leg and beat him with the butt of guns. Consequently, he got severe injuries in his body. Finally, the Jawans left him in the village and went away. Later, William got treatment and overcame from the pain. However, he didn't file case against the Jawans in fear of being victimized by them again. The Jawans victimized William because he had exposed the brutal killing of his younger brother Lucas and he had also dared to file a case against them in Barwadih police station despite pressure and threat by the Barwadih Police. Since, then he has become villain in the eyes of the Security Forces.

According to William, the security forces rule over the region with terror of police uniform and gun. He says, "They would pickup anyone in the name of investigation and torture in the police station and CRPF camp." Another victim Sudama says that the security forces had picked up his wife, daughter and niece, and kept them in the CRPF camp for whole night. When he was coming to Ranchi for filing a complaint against the security forces, they caught and beat him. They also threatened to face a dire consequence if he lodges complaint against them.

Sudama's daughter Smita says that the CRPF Jawans had picked up her after the Saraswati Puja and put her in the CRPF camp for whole night and questioned her. When she responded in Hindi, they claim that she is a Maoist therefore she knows Hindi. Finally, they let her go but asked her not to file a case against them otherwise they'll kill her father Sudama. The family is living under the threat of being tortured again.

It seems that the brutal killing of innocent Lucas Minj has become a milestone in the region for police torture. Lucas had been killed during the joint operation of the CRPF, COBRA and District Police against the Naxalites codified as "Operation Mocks" held in the last week of January this year. According to the reports, the CRPF, COBRA and Police Jawan discovered a Naxal camp near Nawarnago village on January 31, 2012. After demolishing camp, they proceeded further in search of Naxalites. Meanwhile, they saw Lucas Minj, who was rearing cattle near Koel River. They questioned him and asked about the Naxal locations but he could not respond them as he was a dumb person. The Security Forces assumed him as a Naxalite and fired on him. Consequently, he got bullet injury in his head and died at the spot. Finally, the Security Forces covered up his dead body with sand on the bank of river and went away.

In the evening, when Lucas did not return to his home, the family members started searching for him but didn't find even after a week. On February 6, some villagers went for fishing in the Koel River and saw a part of leg coming out of the sand on the bank of the river. They pulled out the dead body and identified as the dead body of Lucas. They found bullet injury in his head. They informed the family immediately. After a few hours, the Barwadih police also reached to the spot though the villagers had not informed them. The Police threatened them to bury the dead body immediately and don't inform anybody about it otherwise they'll send all the villagers to Jail after branding them as Naxals. The Police forced them to bury the dead body. Consequently, the villagers buried the dead body in fear of the Police atrocity. However, the family members approached to the local people's representatives for raising the issue of brutal killing of Lucas. The protest began and the news also appeared in the media. After getting support from the leaders and media, Lucas's elder brother William went to the Barwadih police station on February 12 for filing a case against brutal killing of his brother. As a result, the police filed a case under section 302, 34, 201 and 27 of Arms Act against the unknown persons with the intention to shield the Police, COBRA and CRPF Jawans and alleged that the Naxals have killed Lucas. However, when the villagers argued that since, the Security forces had covered the region then how was it possible for Naxals to enter into the regions and kill him? The police failed to answer the villagers.

When Sylvester stopped speaking, we could able to convince, M Minj, who was in the official duty as caretaker of Sylvester. He started revealing the fact. We were stunned to know the hidden truth. He is younger brother of Lucas and working as a Constable in the Jharkhand Police. He had six brothers and 5 of them have jobs in different places of the state. Lucas was dumb but physically fit, therefore he was only one who was engaged in agriculture work among the brothers. M Minj is posted in Itki police station of Ranchi district. He said, "I'm in official duty to take care of my cousin brother." I'll be here till my brother is completely

recovered," he added. He accepted that there is a huge pressure from the Superintendent of Police (Latehar) not to say anything on the case of Lucas. He also says that if he keeps quite on the killing of Lucas and brutal torture of his family members, the Maoists can also target him as he is a police Jawan. He says, "Everybody in the village is afraid of the Police therefore they chose to keep quiet and face the torture." It was shocking that M Minj has been living under the threat of either losing job or life. If he opens his mouth on the brutal killing of Lucas and torture of other family members, he would lose his job and if he chooses to keep quiet, the Naxals may kill him alleging for taking side of the Police.

It was utterly painful and shocking for us to hear the pain, suffering, agony, anxiety and helplessness of Sylvester and his family members. This family has been in the line of fire for the heinous crime they were never party to. But what is their crime? They have been constantly demanding justice for Lucas and other members who have faced the police torture in the country, where its constitution promises for social, economic and political justice to everyone without any discrimination. We promised Sylvester to file a case to the National Human Rights Commission, spread message about the brutality he faced and hopefully meet him again. What else could have we promised him when the Indian state is determined to deny justice to the people like him who face torture, humiliation and being killed?

Ironically, just two days before, Jairam Ramesh, the Union Minister (Ministry of Rural Development), had visited Latehar and announced a development package of Rs 450 crore for the district in the name of wiping out the Naxal menace by serving the development cola. We have clapped for him on so many occasions praising that he is a daring minister, who visits to the Maoist infested regions. However, I have never seen him visiting to any police torture victim, which makes him no different from the ruling elite. In fact, in the whole debate of Naxalism, the issue of justice is nowhere. The violence and development have over-shadowed the issue of justice, which is the root cause of growth of the Naxalism in the country. Secondly, the grievances redressal mechanisms are either absent, defunct or in the pocket of a few bigwigs. The simple example is, a poor person has no access to police station for filing an FIR and by chance if he/she is able to file FIR, the culprit will never be arrested. And if the culprit is with police uniform, one cannot even imagine to getting justice in the largest democratic country. The torture, brutality and killing seem to be destiny of the marginalized people, whom the state is determined to keep at the margin forever. □□□