



SEARCH

By GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN | ARAB NEWS

# 'Encounter killings' a blot on India's image

**IN an important way, India's democracy is being increasingly tarnished by its police force that uses brutally illegal methods to deal with crime.**

One of them is to kill those suspected of serious offenses in fake encounters. The method followed is simple, but heinous. The suspect is taken to a lonely spot by the police and shot dead. Sometimes, one of the accompanying cops is shot in the arm or leg to make the whole sordid episode look like one where the suspect tried escaping.

The latest such killing, which in India is now termed "encounter death", happened recently in the southern Indian city of Coimbatore, close to Chennai. A cab driver, Mohana Krishnan, was killed by the police as he was reportedly trying to flee from a van that was taking him to the scene of the crime. Krishnan had allegedly kidnapped two young children, raped one of them and drowned both in a canal in what appeared to be a case of kidnapping for ransom. Krishnan was just 23, and his plan went horribly wrong. Or, presumably so.

We would never know what provoked him, and an accomplice who is now in jail, to turn monsters. Was it the lure of consumerism, whose hard-to-resist temptations are now wrecking havoc in a society like India's where most people are poor? The divide between the haves and the have-nots is getting steeper and wider. What makes the situation grimmer is the brazen manner in which the new rich flaunt their wealth. Weddings are getting more lavish, cars larger and gold ornaments heavier and flashier.

However, this is not to justify what Krishnan and his fellow-criminal are alleged to have done. But, at the same time, the guardians of society have not been above board either. They have begun to frequently use kangaroo methods to met out their warped sense of justice. This year, there have been nine encounter deaths in the state of Tamil Nadu alone. Coimbatore is a part of this state.

An important reason for high-handed police behavior is societal pressure and political compulsions. People want instant justice, fed up as they are with the snail-paced judicial system, where corruption and money power rule. Money can win an accused or even a convict his or her freedom, and lawyers are perfectly willing to play the Devil's Advocate for fancy fees. Some of them do not care whether men dangerous to the community are allowed to roam free.

Political pulls also play a role. Governments pressure the police to solve crimes quickly fearing a backlash from opposition parties, which are always ready to raise the bogey of a collapse in law and order. The federal administration in New Delhi is well within its rights to dismiss a state ministry if law and order deteriorates beyond a point.

Aiding and abetting such extra-constitutional steps is cinema. A recent Tamil film, "Naan Mahaan Alla" (I Am No Saint), sent out a highly questionable message. The hero takes law into his hands and turns killer. And, worse, he walks away with no remorse or reprimand! In another movie, shot both in Tamil and Hindi, "A Wednesday", an ordinary citizen kills a group of convicted terrorists after forcing the police to free them from jail. The citizen saunters away with the police chief looking on.

Despite India's reputation as a stable democracy, such human rights violations are rising alarmingly. Some months ago, the reported killing of Suhrabudheen Sheikh, a young Muslim, and his wife in the central Indian state of Gujarat by the police shocked the nation. Sheikh was suspected of having links with terrorists, though the police gave no opportunity to courts to prove or disprove this.

According to a report in the daily newspaper, "Hindustan Times", an explanation for the prevalence of extrajudicial or encounter killings may be found in a confidential letter written over 15 years ago by the head of the Intelligence Bureau. The letter, written by the then Director of the Intelligence Bureau, V. G. Vaidya, to the then Director General of Police, K. P. S. Gill, on Dec. 30, 1991, serves as a de facto blueprint for police forces on how to carry out such killings and avoid public attention.

The report further says: "It dealt with the subject of some police officers revealing to Western journalists how they had killed terrorists without legal sanction. One officer

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The extra-constitutional powers of the police were set into motion a long time ago. In the 1970s West Bengal, many educated, intelligent young men and women were killed by the police because they had chosen the path of Naxalism. In 1979/80, 31 undertrial prisoners in Bhagalpur Jail in Bihar were blinded by policemen, who poured acid into their eyes!

It baggers belief that all this is happening in the land of Mahatma Gandhi and Gautam Buddha.

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