

SURVIVAL AND RIGHT TO INFORMATION

ARUNA ROY



Gulam Rasool
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- Aruna Roy

When Gulam Rasool was killed, the police put out a bulletin commonplace and everyday in Andhra Pradesh newspapers. "Naxalites killed in an encounter with police." What do we feel when we read such a news item? Few of us take it at face value. Most of us know that the "encounter" is a euphemism for murder, and "Naxalite" for anyone dares to persistently question. Despite this, most of us are lulled into looking at the matter with a combination of fear and self preservation. When Shankar Guha Niyogi was eliminated, when Safdar Hashmi was murdered, many protested. But still the larger part of the mainstream looked the other way. What is it that perverts every question of human rights into a fear of anarchy? What translates it into simplistic selfish fears : Will the road be blocked? Will there be lawlessness? Can I catch my train? Losing sight of a fundamental loss of life, an ethical reason to continue with this existence at all

When poor people die on pavements, thousands of tribals are rendered homeless, or when hunger, starvation and death affect large portions of humanity, it becomes only an aggregate in the metropolitan dailies. An issue to talk over a rich breakfast or in well furnished office rooms. In our more private moments, some of us may even ask ourselves where we went wrong. Many of us have raised these questions. It is perhaps one of the reasons why some of us are here today. But our questions have got eschewed in the big stampede for upward mobility. We want money, no matter from where or how it comes. We want greater security, without a thought for those who have none. And we want our own 'development', regardless of its cost to others.

Our society also throws up confused role models. Feudal

social relations revive Sati and Hindutva. An apparently covered civil service - every parents' dream for their children turns upon its own people, nurtured by Colonial values. Most often, by the time we realise the hollowness and perversity of it all, we have been sucked into its mindless fabric Rationalisation becomes second nature.

I passed the I.A.S. Exam in 1968 at the age of 2, and my future seemed assured. My reasons for opting for the I.A.S. were however fairly ordinary. As a woman, I wanted to work and not get married and pass into the limbo of passivity.

I was trained in Tamil Nadu, though I belong to the Union Territories Cadre. Since I was Tamil speaking the Government decided to send me there. I had my first exposure to rural India. In every village we were met by the village Sarpanch and drank innumerable glasses of Horlicks; the drink given to 'officers'. We attracted a crowd wherever we went. I was convinced that we are meeting the poor and that their voices were being heard.

During the District training I gradually discovered how little I actually knew about rural realities. The real fears of responsibility for action and redressal began to weigh heavily on me. I was drawn into the role of arbitrator and judge; but I was ill equipped to guarantee justice. The information levels grew. Along with it the knowledge that the first two years as SDM would be important years to do something that could make a difference. I knew at the same time that the Tehsildar and the BDO, middle aged, experienced officials, could mislead me. Did I really have the time to understand them and their motives?

One enters the I.A.S. with the feeling that being a civil servant will provide the opportunity for working effectively for social justice, within a strictly legal framework. The institutional framework though already corrupt, offered at least a structure within which it was possible to try and make the system function better. There was scope to fight the system of patronage that exists within the Government; or at least to make it deliver with some justice. There also seemed to be some measure of manipulation possible within the legal, institutional framework to influence both policy and implementation. We were encouraged to believe that the I.A.S. is the chosen elite that is going to set the country

on its feet, and show up the corruption and nepotism. The district training, quickly and effectively ripped the illusion apart. The knots are large and completely baffling. An unfamiliarity with the law, makes it impossible to act without local guidance, and the local officials know it. It takes the better part of a posting to sit on the problem. It is not only the officialdom. The local power group has also learnt to influence and manipulate the office. It is seldom that the really poor or oppressed have access to the officer. They are victims of the system and tradition, where contact with officers has always been through brokers. To get the way cleared takes a while.

It is also difficult to understand the intricacies of local politics. Which political leader pleads for whom and why? What are the relationships that exist between the powerful and the dependent voters? What is the nature of the specific divide between groups? These are questions that need time and humility to understand. If the first is in short supply because of the nature of the posting, the latter is sure to be eradicated in the year in the Academy. 'You are members of an elite service.' 'You are the ones who will direct policy, give direction to the political master.' 'You are the brains of the country and such-like render learning difficult. Even if there was humility, lack of familiarity often leads the junior, well meaning I.A.S. officer to trust the wrong person, and misunderstand because of one's mistake! The I.A.S. officer can do no wrong in front of the public.

The civil service like the educational system is still controlled by a decadent colonial spirit. The deep suspicion of the people, the need to separate the officer from the community, the notion of privacy (including palatial residential accommodation) are all colonial concepts. Concepts which have bred and continue to breed separatism and alienation as a matter of principle and pride. The repeated fear of every subdivisional officer is of the 'mob'. A description of a group of people who may go to meet the officer more than 10 in number. There is a fear of facing the people alone. The police have to stand around very often to give the officer any self confidence. This is as true if women in large numbers to meet them, unarmed and harmless. 'Please send a delegation in,' is the oft repeated request or order. It would be very surprising to the members of the 'mob', if they know that post lunch conversations in the Delhi Administration were very often detailed and

repeated anecdotes of how these officers ordered firing and controlled 'mobs'. The I.A.S.' spirit of valor comes out with these anecdotes where the vanquished are their own people asking for their rights, protesting against injustice. Used to be filled with great unease and disquiet. How could such an accepted position foster social justice and change?

Even for a good bureaucrat the limitations are very often crippling. The duration of the posting determines the nature of the work. But inevitably the work done is reversed by the person who follows. There is no change guaranteed unless there is a strong political will that backs and supports the policy and ensures continuity even with a change of officer.

But the feudal trappings remain unchanged, including the numbers of hangers on who continue to applaud every utterance, like the courtiers of old. There is no system of genuine feed back and review - systemic or otherwise. Any real attempt at change would a direct confrontation with politicians and senior civil servants. It would most definitely mean a transfer. Those officers at the sub-divisional level who have attempted genuine land reform, have had to face tremendous odds. There are innumerable examples. The I.A.S. only allows the odds of innovation in the softer areas of development-literacy, family planning, women's education, health and social welfare. In other areas any attempt even to implement the law is viewed negatively and the consequences are writ large on the wall for every one to see. This has led in most cases to working within the narrow framework of conventionally accepted positions. I did not see the point of continuing to work in a system where I had notional power and trappings. I could not really even begin to talk about fairness in inter-relationships amongst the elite, leave alone genuine change. I took the decision to leave the I.A.S. in 1975, but I still had a number of un-answered questions. What brings about social change? How does collective action come about? Why is the mainstream so divorced from this other greater reality?

The democratic political system, with a vote for every citizen, has got embroiled in feudal caste relations. What appears before us now is an emperor who stands naked. And a people who see him being stripped with every fresh scam; but who are nevertheless afraid to expose his nakedness. If they should say so they are not sure of the

consequences. In self protection they keep quiet. Like they did when Gulam Rasool was taken away. When Shankar Guha Niyogi was shot, when Safdar Hashmi was battered to death by political goons, when the poor are plundered, raped and looted without a murmur of protest.

Even where there is no reason to be afraid, of a tremendous apathy, a moral paralysis and hopelessness grips those who could do something. A feeling that nothing can come out of anything, becomes a continual refrain. This refrain is for some, a means of auto suggestion to stop the despair of not being to find answers. For many others it is a convenient position to pursue their careers and self interest without a sense of guilt.

Something has to be done to break this apathy. This large noisy silence-where Star TVs and cricket scores sponsored by PEPSI and McDOWELS - covers up the uneasiness of not finding any real courage. Every now and then when some solitary or collective voices protest, and are silenced, agony grips us for a moment.

A State gets violent. It's henchmen cause death. Commissions of enquiry get set up to keep the illusion going that the state still functions. But can the State condemn itself? Can real justice be expected from a system that is essentially unjust. Even greater cause for concern, that all this is done evoking the Constitution, the laws of the land and democratic principals.

That is why it is important to know why the second part of the TLN Reddy Commission report was not made public. It is important that we all collectively ask for state accountability. That we assert our right to question and put to test the democratic facade and statements. We have to struggle to ensure our own rights on our own terms. The institutions set up to rule cannot any more get away with what they did with an innocent and trusting electorate 50 years ago.

What is strengthening is that there are Gulam Rasools in this country. Good citizens who feel that someone must uncover the truth. They are people who realised that the uncovering and peeling off the layers of deception is an essential pre-requisite to motivating change.

They do not espouse a cause, but create circumstances where the people can judge. Some are celebrated, and many remain unsung. It is in their memory today, that the battle for information and transparency gains strength and hope.

There has always been the strong individual who has fought battles on behalf of society. There have also been collective struggles against state hypocrisy and its false assurances. I would like to spend some time today in exploring with all of you the potential of using the potential of using the people's Right to Information to initiate a shift from representative to participatory forms of Democracy. And to suggest that this seemingly academic issue is an intrinsic part of struggles for livelihood and survival. Implicit in this is a basic faith in the ability of people to decide what is best for themselves, and the premise that uncompromising openness is vital to the health of a society. The points I raise today, are drawn from the lessons and questions thrown up by a fledgling Campaign on The Peoples Right to Information. Its efforts to uncover the contradictions, and put before the people the dual and split personality of the State, has already caused great discomfort to ruling power structures. More important however is the glimmer of hope breaking through the despair and cynicism of those who have been even peripherally involved. One of the most fundamental pillars of democratic functioning is the recognition of an inalienable Right to the Freedom of Expression. While the freedom of speech is its most obvious manifestation, it is important to realise that the concept encompasses much more. An exploration in to the Right to speak and express dissent, will lead us to the understanding that it must be accompanied by the explicit Right to ask questions and demand answers.

We are faced in this country by the firmly established culture of secrecy, and silence. Western patenting is a crude method of appropriating knowledge when compared with the mystification, seclusion and exclusion moulded into caste hierarchies in India. It has reached a point where it has become self-defeating. Today, Indian systems of knowledge have become so exclusive, that it has been lost even to its own custodians. Also well developed is a culture of silence. We are sullen, unhappy, comprehending, suffering; but silent. That is our collective ethos, developed by others but shared today by all. We are

never encouraged to ask. We never demand an answer.

In this campaign the analysis, and paradigm of struggle has been defined organically and collectively by a group of ordinary people. Many of whom live from day to day; looking for daily wage work. For who abstractions like 'rights' mean nothing and can only define their existence in the context of hunger or lack of it, illness or good health work and unemployment. They have in this struggle defined their livelihood and their right to live in terms of their organic relationship with the State, and their birthright to hold it accountable. The relationship between a citizen and the State does not end with IRDP list and JRY programmers. The people have a right to know, a right to question, a collective Constitutional right to receive an answer.

There are some very important ingredients that went into making the Right to Information a peoples issue in Rajasthan. The first was a recognition of the fact that there is much that the people already know. The oppressed certainly know the reasons for their exploitation. It is a part of their daily existence. The figures are the statistical story of their oppression, and the mechanics provide irrefutable clues about the source of affluence of many others. Unfortunately, the literate world is not interested in recognising such information. Dose one need to wonder why? Who after all is interested in the detailed examination of the story of their ill gotten wealth? The most convenient solution is to ignore and label irrelevant, any such information.

It is therefore of vital importance to provide recognition to such information. To force reality upon a world practiced in self deception. This of course is easier said than done. It involves a process of gathering, collating and collectively analysing the information so that the internal contradictions and bare faced lies of the rulers stand exposed. It requires setting one set of facts against another; one set of statistics with another; and contrasting one stated reality with another. This is not an academic battle, but the foundation on which competing ideologies are built. If we are to work towards the construction of a peoples ideology this process is imperative. The movement for the Right to Information was born from one such collective understanding of ordinary people in Rajasthan. The simple but straight forward demand

of access to detailed records of development works, including bills, vouchers, and muster-rolls has snowballed into a statewide debate on transparency and accountability of the State. How was this demand formulated?

Some of the roots lie in a struggling collective understanding of relationships and power equations in a changing socio-political scenario. Village people have known what their reality is. But for any kind of socio-political change, comprehension of their own reality has not been enough. They have had to comprehend the mechanics of power and the idiom of a so-called democratic polity. Since authority is vested in structures that span a large canvas, their comprehension of their own small specific reality has been dismissed often as trivial or insignificant.

The Government has thrived on a culture of secrecy and silence—an inheritance from its Colonial past. Occasionally, the pressures of democracy have forced them to reveal information under duress. But this information is so general, that no clarity or benefit can be derived from it. In focusing on the muster rolls, bills and vouchers a nerve end has been exposed. A beginning has been made to fight for the State's accountability to its own people. It has taken them to the more fundamental questions of transparency of functioning and democratic sharing of power and responsibility.

Enough has been said about people's knowledge, not to have re-define it. But it would be interesting to see it in the context of the present struggle. Whenever working village women and men in Rajasthan have got together they have always brought with them a wealth of information about their work and development. There are detailed accounts of work sites. Who worked, how they were cheated, what materials arrived and to whom they went—very often not to the work site. These accounts are sometimes coloured by biases but always minute in detail and interrelated with many other happenings. People's evening chats in rural Rajasthan are dotted with changes of this sort. Working people have also tried to use this method of collecting information, mainly culled and through the oral tradition in their interaction with modern structures like the Panchayats. Non-payments of minimum wages and the cheating on work sites however could never be substantiated by them, because officialdom countered it with...." But the papers do not

say so. "Semi literate and literate workers began noting down information in their little diaries one was flaunted in public view in Beawar as a parallel in essence and substance to the Jain diaries!! Even then official documentary evidence always went contrary to what people know was right.

So a demand for transparency began. To ask was the first step. The visual black humour of a 'mate' running away with a muster roll under his arm was matched only by stories of cows consuming muster roll! Once the importance of access to a muster roll began to be defined in peoples minds, the shades of corruption possible with it also became clearer. Muster rolls filled but gone; major discrepancies between Kucha muster rolls filled on site and official muster rolls submitted for payments; totally fraudulent muster rolls, filled only to make money just disappearing without a trace. Recent reports of the M.P. muster roll scam just prove what people have always known.

Once the muster roll was identified and highlighted as an important primary document for defrauding people of wages, the demand to see bills and vouchers was a logical second step. People watch and notice the incoming tractors filled with material, they count empty sacks, they notice tat money is paid and a transaction concluded. A village existence does not allow for great secrecy anyhow. But it is even more difficult to hid materials like stones, cement, chuna and stone slabs. People also know where these materials go. But the government auditor comes and goes and gives a clean chit and all seems well. With new buildings about to crack and brand new check dams sprouting fountains, indifference has given way to indignation. The examination of accounts is now recognised as an important skill to learn. Accounts may not be understood in their overall form. But people are extremely well equipped to demistify accounting technology. We have excellent systems by which illiterate women have traditionally lent money, working out dues to the last paisa. What people needed to know was the methods through which a fraud could be committed by a group of people and supported through apparently legal methods by others. The unnecessarily complicated rules and orders used only to facilitate corruption, need to be understood to be countered. What lies within the four corners of an official order is not necessarily just. The Right to Information issue has been talked about in Seminar rooms and policy papers for over a decade. It is now

one of the catchwords of every national politician and Political party. But what has shot the MKSS struggle into prominence is that it has perhaps been the first grass roots struggle with the specific and primary articulated demand for the Right to Information. While the issue emerged from the struggle for livelihood of the rural poor, their specific demands for information were contained within the obvious legitimacy of the citizens Right to Information. While important peoples struggles like the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the victims of the Bhopal Gas tragedy have also emphasised the right to access specific kinds of information, the information issue in such cases got contained within their wider demands. By high-lighting the wider issues of the birthright of all citizens to obtain information on all matters which affect their lives, the MKSS campaign gave room to a wide spectrum of interest groups to see themselves as a part of this struggle. In this case the specific demand for photocopies of bills, vouchers and muster rolls was indeed seen as an illustration of the importance of the demand, giving it immediate life and meaning. The difference between the issue of transparency and a people's demand for the right to information indicates the fundamental shift in who asks the questions. Demanding information is much more than the framing of a question. It is an attack on the culture of secrecy, the vested interests hidden within the structures that control decision making. People in Rajasthan and soon after in other parts of the country began to see the significance of the issue in their own lives and struggles. The political machinery which was paid great lip service to the issue for years found itself ill equipped to deny a simple, straightforward demand despite its implications for a radical shift in the sharing and wielding of power.

A scam a day. Every mornings newspapers bring to our homes yet another story of a nation taken for a ride. Hawala, Gawala, Urea, the stock market, uniforms, medicines, land, shoe contract, bureaucrats selling the country, politicians selling themselves, investigating agencies selling time, and newspapers and magazines selling like hotcakes because of all this. The middle class hates paying bribes, it does for a berth on a train, for clearing a building plan, for getting a government job, a transfer, a place for their children in college, for getting the phone repaired, the electricity meter fixed, the license renewed. Yet what the middle class hates even more is fighting the battle itself. There is a need for a Lochinwar-a Seshan a, Khainar a, Kiran

Bedi, an Alphons, an Anna Hazare and now there is an entire band of Knights in shining armour - the Supreme Court. It has been celebrating the activism of its new heroes in this never ending proxy war. While each one of these heroes have played an undoubtedly outstanding part in fighting lonely battles, are these the solutions? There is a certain degree of truth in the assertion that corruption is a never ending malaise. Anti-corruption campaigns are used from time to time to alter the balance of power between competing equals. Many feel that corruption is an entirely symptomatic and superficial political issue. That endemic causes of such systematic malaise are never examined as a result of such battles. After all, it is undoubtedly true that what one has seen coming out is only the tip of the iceberg. We are all convinced that under any contract, and any patronage, in any sector-lies a scam. We have seen how investigating agencies, and audit bodies have failed in their duties for years even decades, so that each scam has grown to gigantic proportions. We are relieved that finally some big names have gone to jail. That some others are spending a lot of time seeking bail. But none of this has or will change the way the nation is run.

How then has the MKSS campaign differed? It is not also a campaign against corruption? The scam uncovered in monetary terms have been miniscule in comparison to the national ones. The people who have been identified as the thieves are mere pawns in a system where the big fish continue to call the shots. What is the significance of the MKSS experience?

The most outstanding factor in the campaign in Rural Rajasthan is that it is a peoples struggle. Corruption for the primary movers in the struggle is only an incidental, though undoubtedly important issue. Corruption has been the external manifestations of the denial of a right, an entitlement, a wage, a medicine, a bag of urea, 20 kgs of ration rice, 56 gms of dalia and 8 gms of oil. It is the denial of a right to question.

The information movement in central Rajasthan focused on development works because of the importance of issue of employment and wages in the area. For the poor in this area, these are their means of living and survival. Peoples support has been the most important evaluator of the importance of an issue in any mass organisation. As a result, mass

organisations will always take up issues that people consider important. However, all struggles have a very important element of dialogue and communication. The oppressed will have to seek allies in their battle for survival, by exposing the bankruptcy of their oppressor position. The mere demand for the right kind of information can undermine the confidence of far more powerful opponents. But there will have to be a conscious collective effort to frame the right questions. Even if answers are not provided, much is gained because it only confirms for those silently watching, that there is indeed something to hide.

To explicitly refuse to provide information is also very difficult in today's circumstances. Institutions in Democratic and Liberalised India have played great lip service to the jargon of transparency. By forcing action on such pronouncements, the people have an opportunity to define the debate in their terms, rather than be saddled with yet another manipulative definition.

Survival is just the act of existence - technically short of all additional needs. Its limits are defined by the World Bank's "safety nets" designed to keep the nose of a drowning population just above the water. When there was a Welfare state and there were avowals of 2- and 5 point programmes and Garibi Hatao, the State still had a stated objective of fighting poverty, and the responsibility to meet basic needs. Now we are told that the market will do it all. With the almost unrestricted entry of multinationals and global pressures, it is vitally important that the people on the margins, seek answers from the State as to the reasons why even the little they have is being snatched away. The poor in India have never really been dependent on State support. But when they are ousted from their own homes, driven off their land, beaten to death, raped, rendered job-less; they must surely have a right to ask questions which the State is duly bound to answer. Information becomes tangible - a home, food, a well, a school, employment, fuel and fodder.

People need to know why their names are not on ration cards. How much sugar, kerosene or grain is entered in the PDS Register. They need to know what medicines are free. How many doctors should come and when. An endless number of questions which must be answered. These questions do not relate to Defence and the security of the State. This is people's money, raised and spent in their name.

It is both tragic and ironic that 50 years after independence we should ask, not for information for better living, for better education but to merely ensure our survival. Because the entire edifice of organised extortion is built upon grassroot structures of exploitation, questions asked at the bottom will threaten all the way to the top. At this level, there is much less room for theoretical arguments and doublespeak. No matter how others may describe their condition, those fighting a battle for survival speak a language that is shorn of decoration. Their questions will be incisive, and their demands will instinctively be pinpointed and direct. We need to search for and create forums where such voices will be heard and others will be compelled to listen. The large numbers of middle class fence sitters must realise that their own future is precarious and tenuous.

Technology and export mean 'Progress'. Repeatedly multinational corporations with their Indian partners have entered areas where 'development' and 'progress' are possible. Multinationals have found bauxite in Koraput, Raigada and surrounding areas in tribal Orissa. People protest when they are ousted from their land and homes. But no one listens. Answers are given only in the State's repressive measures and grand statistics of foreign investment.

In Alwar, Rajasthan arable fertile land is acquired for a "public purpose" through forced sales and used to establish liquor factories. Official statements issued from Jaipur blithely lie that large numbers of jobs will be created and that pollution has been eliminated by new magical technology. It requires a public hearing in the village to how false these claims are.

In South Canara multinationals are coming in to set up joint ventures and land reform laws considered sacrosanct are circumvented by creating a new concept called "Zoning". The Government claims that land ceiling laws are intact.

Human Rights Commissions are set up by the State, while fake encounters, custodial deaths, disappearances increase. Hunger, minimum wages and the right to food, shelter and clothing are no longer classified as human rights issues.

We need to call a halt to this misrepresentation. The truth must come out. Access to information exposes the gap between the legal framework of a State and its actual functioning. It lays bare the real politick of a class that has normally ruled in the name of the Republic, the Constitution, the National Anthem and the National Flag. And which has put down dissent by simplistically branding it anti-national and anti-state. This access exposes the ruling class and reveals its loyalties. It allows us to estimate the degree to which we have been pawned off and sold. But more critically, by allowing citizens to be watchdogs, it gives us a unique opportunity to curtail the arbitrary exercise of power.

This has been a year of scams. At one end of the spectrum the scams are about big business and big pay offs. But at the other end is what the poor consume - fodder in Bihar, muster rolls in M.P., medicines and foodgrains across the country.

If the people in Bihar had known about the fodder and been able to check the register - the scam would have been detected long ago. Fodder is voluminous, tangible and is easily seen. Yet years of audit and state vigilance managed to see this non-existent fodder.

Information has enabled an exposure of the contradiction between promise and action. It has been a battle led by the poor (or an organisation of the poor) where the vested interest is changing the systems of exploitation are linked to their livelihood and survival. It is immensely significant because the entire edifice stands on this huge foundation of institutionalised robbery. At this "grass roots" level an exposure reveals that for the people at the receiving end of such extraction, corruption and exploitation means the same thing.

This campaign has also shown the middle class that their security is extremely fragile and that their own future is linked to a tottering structure. It is this marriage of interests between the poor and the middle class, that contain the seeds of a peoples movement against something much larger than corruption. The specifics will vary from area to area. But this movement has found a tool which exposes the contradictions of an economic order based on profit and money, which claims to "sustainable develop" all. It removes the veneer from statistics, and presents specifics. It allows those at the bottom to no merely demand

that their voice be heard but that their questions be answered. In some of their questions are contained the ingredients of a debate on ethics and governance which our entire people are ready for. After all, despite the huge increase in personal resources of the middle and upper income groups - there is a degree of disquiet about how simplistically the whole development blueprint has been packaged. There is unhappiness with the obvious lack of ethics in Governance. And there is at least a nagging doubt that things are not quite as they are made out to be. The questions being raised by the poor are based on an indisputable reality - at gross variance with what has been put on record. The emperor is indeed wearing no cloths!

We are faced with an unholy nexus of contorted institutions in our polity today. Feudal social relationships, a colonial bureaucracy and a corrupt representative democracy use a facade of democratic and constitutional cover for their misdeeds.

Feudal social relationships emerge again and again woven into our democratic polity. Caste and Hindutva re-emerge as weapons to re-instate past glory. Relationships in political parties, between the citizen and his representative are coloured by the feudal hangover. Abusers of justice continue with the Patriarchal treatment of women. Reactionary opinion is reflected in various judicial pronouncements all over the country - Bhanwari's case in Rajasthan is symbolic. Miss. World contests are superimposed on the picture of traditional Indian womanhood symbolised by Sati. The Shiv Sena hosted Michael Jackson justifying his artistic freedom, while M.F. Hussain is attacked for the artistic liberty he took while painting Saraswati. A cameo on how the communal in India conveniently draws a meandering boundary of acceptable limits! We need to slice through the confusion being created. The unemployed youth in Maharashtra need to think about how many jobs the proceeds of Michael Jackson's concert will create for them, and the responsibilities of the ruling Shiv Sena in generating employment through policy decisions and financial allocations. Citizens of Bangalore need to know exactly how much it costs the administration to play surrogate hosts to the Miss. World contest, and how much Amitabh paid. We have to ask the right questions so that the focus on issues basic to peoples living intensifies.

Democracy and real sharing of political power is far away

from the reaches of the common men. Elected representatives have amply demonstrated their lack of concern for the people who have elected them to power. Ethics has got divorced from Governance, people from their representatives, development from the well being of those for whom it is set in motion, literacy from responsibility. Corruption has therefore become the manifestation of today's governments and their hypocritical stances. Political parties have not stopped to look critically at themselves or processes they are involved in. Civil servants have sold their souls to the devil with Faustian sophistry. The electorate has got beguiled by revival of caste loyalties and simplistic offers of a taste of paradise. Global alternatives have narrowed to Hobson's choice of free markets symbolised by Kentucky fried chicken, Pepsicola, Uncle Chips, Start TV and the horrifying prospects of having all natural resources raped for the gods of Profit. The intellectuals have sunk deep into their armchairs in bewilderment.

Representative democracy has become a farce. The representative represents only himself. Votes are bought. The voters forgotten. The representative refuses to be answerable. The overlay of caste politics has deepened the chasm. The process of election is reduced to a head count of legislators required to cobble together a majority. Governance is somehow keeping this flock together. Issues are lost. Democracy has been reduced to this one vote.

Vying with each other for power sharing, opposing parties find it convenient to keep away from the people. Their ideologies if any have been subsumed by the third for power and position. Theoretically, their functioning is dependent on power given to them in a democratic process. They are answerable to the people. But there has never worried them, because they let it be known that the well being of the people depended on bureaucratic and political handouts. The feudal behavioural pattern played into their hands. Those who rule have lost all credibility, but a decadent ruling class continues, secure in its belief that no alternative exists. In fifty years we have managed to shatter all our dreams.

There are occasions when the collective perceptions of a struggling group provide us with an opportunity to break through a fog of confusion and listlessness. There is never a magic wand which can show the way. But there are moments when even a single step forward

breaks the lethargy. The information campaign has grown in both potential and magnitude to a point where it can affect us all. It needs to be recognised and established as an explicit fundamental right because it has shown that its application will strengthen democratic functioning in a very basic manner.

At a time when representative democracy has failed to provide governance either responsive or accountable to the people, it provides the much needed first step towards participatory democracy. Unlike the concept of Transparency, the Right to Information requires an activist approach. It puts the burden of framing questions and demanding answers on the people. By establishing a Right, it creates a vested interest in forcing the truth to be stated. It gives ordinary people and opportunity to puncture the bubble of lies and fantasy that they are surrounded by. It allows them to place their understanding on record. To point out the false premises that may exist in the dominant frame work. It reduces the excuses for inaction, and encourages resistance. But most important of all the Right to Information forces an analytical debate based on facts. In this debate, those asking the questions are going to be subjected to the same standards of ethical behaviour as those they are asking questions of. But the contours of the Right to Information campaign are yet to be defined. The struggle in Rajasthan has shown us that it has the potential to pinpoint the extortion and force some degree of accountability on the State and Development machinery. The fact that it concerned a livelihood issue ensure that it was used by the people. But the use of information in fighting other forms of oppression and exploitation will have to be identified and developed. There are areas where understanding and using technical information will not be as simple. It is a tool that we will have to learn how to use. The challenge forced by the new power structures of multinational corporation; there growing control over resources and every aspect of peoples lives will have to be understood, before the Right to Information can be used to force the power structures they control to answer the uncomfortable questions raised. How will it be possible to extract answer from super structures like the World Bank, who dictate terms to national Governments? These are forces that control peoples destiny today. Their policies in distant Washington affect every aspect of remote villagers life. If the threads that connect cannot be severed then a method must be found where the strings can be pulled from both ends. They must also be accountable. Gulam Rasool was

young. He wrote for a Telugu newspaper and committed to his profession but not divorced from his roots in rural Andhra. He asked, he probed and he informed. We need more like him in this country. Perhaps in the questions that have begun to be asked everywhere, the numbers will increase and make it impossible for the State or mafia to eliminate them. In their questions, collective voice and struggle Gulam Rasool continues to love.

December, 1996

Killing Fields

On Sunday, 29 December 1991, newspapers in Hyderabad carried a report that two unidentified Naxalites were killed in an encounter at Masjidguda, on the outskirts of the city. According to the police they were killed in the early hours of 28 December in an exchange of fire. By next evening it became known that one of the killed was Gulam Rasool, a reporter working with Udayam - third largest circulating Telugu daily. The news left everyone in shocked disbelief.

Gulam Rasool (30) was working as a city reporter of Udayam for the last six months. He joined the profession in 1986 after completing his intermediate (+2) and had earlier worked with Eenadu, Andhra Jyoti and Andhra Patrika. While working as a stringer, he did his B.A. through the A.P. Open University. Rasool comes from a poor family of Sharajipeta. Aleru, Nalgonda. He was a first generation graduate, if not the first literate, in his family. His own background as deeply influenced his interest within his profession and he was known for his reports on poor people. Commitment to the profession led him to make daring break-throughs in his reportage. Among the more well-known of his stories were his interviews with Sardar, a wanted underworld figure of Hyderabad, and with a dalam (armed squad) leader the Naxlite movement. He also covered police harassment of villagers in his area, misuse of TADA, and role of police in the land grabbing and eviction of slum dwellers in NTR Nagar in the city. In the latter story, Mr. K. Rajaiah, DSP of Saroornagar was named. In recent weeks Rasool appears to have done an investigation into the role of police in land grabbing activities in and around the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad.

On 27 December rasool left Udayam office around 5 p.m., went to the house of a friend. Vijayaprasada Rao (30), Rao was from the same village as Rasool and was an unemployed post graduate in Public Administration from Osmania University. He was an associate of National Students Union of India (NSUI) Both of them went to Eenadu office and left the place around 6.30 p.m. Attempts to trace their movements, in so far as recorded evidence goes, dry up around his

time. There is one eye-witness account that suggests that both were picked up by the police an hour later, not very far from Rasool's house near amberpet. Seven hours later they were taken to an abandoned shed in the open fields near Masjidguda about 20 kms from the city. Both of them were shot there, Next morning policy announced that, acting on a tip-off they went to the village and found a meeting of a Naxalite armed squad taking place. They appealed to the Naxalite to surrender Instead the Naxalites opened fire. In self defence police opened fire. Two Naxalites died on the spot while others escaped. The police hand-out also claimed that there was nothing on the bodies or in the shed that could enable them to identify the dead. Subsequently their bodies were taken to Gandhi Hospital, Secunderabad from where they were removed on Sunday afternoon. The villagers say that they were not aware of any meeting and that the had only heard a jeep and a van around 3 a.m. and a little later sounds of gunshots. The village elders, who signed the Panchanama said that the police removed wallets from the bodies which contained identity cards of the two young men. Following uproar in the press, police claimed that they were able to identify one of the victims as Gulam Rasool. According to them, Rasool was involved in extortion of money on the behalf of Naxalites, was a member of an armed squad of CPI (ML.) (People's War) and was involved in a murder case. An alert journalist community in the city is now able to trace and name some of the policemen involved in the arrest and killing of Rasool and Rao. They include Circle Inspectors, Rami Reddy (Saroomnagar), Muralidhar (Vanasthalipuram) and Laxmi Narayana (Ibrahimpattanam) and were led by DSP, Mr. K. Rajaiah.

The Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUW) took up the matter at all levels, successful bandh calls were given by the union in a number of places. The state government conceded the demand for judicial enquiry but categorically rejected the demand for suspension of the police officials involved. This has emboldened the policemen to threaten the journalists. Many journalists in Hyderabad received telephone calls warning them that they will be "bumped off" if they continue to write about police among those who received such phone calls were the president of APUWJ and chief reporter of Indian Express. The situation for reporters in rural areas and district centres had become worse. It must be noted that almost all Telugu dailies bring out separate district supplements every day. To feed the six page supplements, all newspapers have engaged stringers even in remote mandal head quarters on a piece-

rate basis. It is these rural correspondents who have become particularly insecure after the murder of a reporter based in a metropolis. In Karimnagar eight journalists have received direct threat from the police. In warangal demonstrating journalists were lathi-charged by a contingent of Border Security Force (BSF).

The murder of Gulam Rasool and Vijayaprasada Rao in fake encounter is part of large scale killing of unarmed citizens in the name of "curbing extremism" in the state. As many as 106 people were killed in these encounters in 1991 alone. According to the investigations of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee, not more than 10 of those killed were members of armed squads. All the rest were unarmed citizens like Rasool and Rao. This spate of murders has gone up since December when para military forces joined various armed outfits of AP police in their attempt to crash Naxalite movement. In the last 50 days about 60 people were killed in "encounters."

The Andhra Pradesh police, in addition to the regular armed wing (APSP), have organised their forces called Anti Naxalite Squad (ANS), special Task Force (STF) and Special String Force (SSF). These special forces are not governed by any legislation and are not horizontally integrated with the local administration. Thus they are not accountable to any one. It is these state sponsored vigilante groups which are responsible for the killing of unarmed citizens. In a reprehensible policy, the government has instituted a set of incentives to policemen involved in encounter. They include out of turn promotions and monetary awards. Thus it became profitable for the police to kill people in encounters. It must be added that in the past, as and when the government in power decided, for whatever reason, to go slow on "encounters" or curb them altogether, there have been fewer encounters or even a complete halt to such killings.

Likewise, whenever the government in power announced a resolve to "finish-off Naxalites within six months" as Home Ministers have been periodically declaring for the last 25 years, there was a noticeable suit in such encounters. That explains the rate of killings (see back cover). In other words "encounters" are not excesses of the police nor are they chance happenings. They are part of a deliberate political policy. And most of the victims of this lethal policy are tribals, agricultural Labourers, small farmers, miners and casual workers. The various agencies of the state police are thus given a free hand with cash benefits.

To these existing agencies para military forces of the centre have been added recently. Initially in 1990 central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) was inducted. Later, some times in March 1991, Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) was added. IATBP, unlike similar bodies is not a legally constituted force. It was formed, for administrative convenience, in 1954 for checkpost protection along the Tibetan Border. In 1962 it was upgraded as a guerilla force after the border conflict with the People's Republic of China. this is perhaps the first time that the force in a major way is engaged in activities that cannot exactly be described as guarding the 2,000 km long border with Tibet. In a belated move to bestow legality on this para military force, recently the Union Cabinet in its meeting on 2 January, 1992 decided to introduce a legislation bringing the force under the purview of an Act of Parliament. ITBP was joined in December 1991 by a number of companies of BSF. The deployment of ITBP and BSF in the north western districts of Telangana region interior Andhra Pradesh is not without its ironies. The government and its media have been saying, with some justification that the porous borders have become the channel for Pakistani trained militants enter Kashmir valley. The army, means essentially to guard and fight against meant to guard the borders are sent to Telangana.

Thus presently ANS, STF, APSP, CRPF, ITBP and BSF are engaged in resolving the "Naxalite problem" in Andhara Pradesh. For the last one month village after village in Warangal and Karimnagar are being subjected to raids by the combined forces of these agencies.

PUDR, NEW DELHI

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