

# Parag Das and Z.V. Yaopei

## *Martrys of the democratic rights movement*

Civil rights activist and editor of *Asomiya Protidin* Parag Das was assassinated on 17 May 1996 in Guwahati in broad daylight, while picking up his son from school.

Born on 24 February 1961, Parag Das did his schooling in Guwahati and graduated from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University. After a Master's degree in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics, he worked with Punjab National Bank, Unit Trust of India, and then as General Manager of the Guwahati Stock Exchange.

In the mid-eighties, he changed profession and became a journalist. He worked as a columnist at *The Sentinel* before becoming editor of *Bodhbar* and then *Aghan*. In 1995 he became working editor of *Asomiya Protidin*. He also wrote books on freedom of speech, independent economic policy and political autonomy in the North East.

Parag Das played an active role in the formation of the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti in 1991. At the time of his death he was General Secretary of the organization, committed to the cause of civil liberties and democratic rights in an atmosphere of violence and terror.

The first report of MASS documented custodial deaths and rapes by the security forces, and the killing of innocent persons in fake encounters. Since then, the organization has exposed the active sponsorship by the state of communal riots at Barpeta, and publicized indiscriminate killings by the army not only in Assam but in neighbouring Nagaland and Manipur as well, such as the firing at Mokokchung on 27 December 1994 and the killing of ten people at Imphal in January 1995.

Various movements for autonomy have arisen in the political context of the region. The state has usually responded by treating these political issues as law and order problems, and launched counter-insurgency operations. These have invariably meant further violations of democratic rights. Operation Rhino was declared on 14 September 1991. In spite of enormous obstacles, MASS managed to document 19 deaths, 7 rapes and molestations, 120 cases of illegal detention, torture and then release, 137 cases of detention, torture and handing over to police, and 63 cases of persons being badly beaten

during indiscriminate raids on villages, in the first month of Operation Rhino.

Consistent protests against excesses by police and security forces, and the widespread use of anti-democratic laws like TADA, Armed Forces Special Powers Act, National Security Act and Assam Disturbed Areas Act, made MASS the target of regular attacks from the state. And a journalist like Parag Das was doubly vulnerable: because he published not only this information, but also other reports about rampant corruption in various wings of the state bureaucracy. For these activities he was arrested twice under TADA.

Close on the heels of the killing of Parag Das, Z.V. Yaopie, a 45-year-old civil rights lawyer was shot dead brutally in Dimapur on 23 May. He had been filing cases regularly over the last fourteen years, against violations of people's rights. He had just returned home from a meeting with state officials in which he had informed them of his intention to file a writ of *habeas corpus* for Nagas being kept detained illegally by the army.

Both Parag Das and Z.V. Yaopie, in an effort to reach out to the people of mainland India, recently provided support to a civil liberties team investigating army excesses in the Northeast.

As violence escalates in Assam, the newly-elected Asom Gana Parishad government which had demanded the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in its election campaign, has asked for greater deployment of army troops in Assam, to help maintain law and order. The irony is that citizens like Parag Das, who documented and resisted such anti-democratic laws, and helped build public opinion against these laws, are shot dead and silenced, when their civil liberties work is perceived as a threat to the authority of the state.

In order to restore peace and normalcy and to safeguard the life, liberty and dignity of the citizens of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, we demand:

- ☐ Punish the killers of Parag Das and Z.V. Yaopie.
- ☐ Repeal the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act.

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