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The loneliness of being Hasan Gafoor

Maseeh Rahman : Fri Dec 18 2009, 02:28 hrs



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After 26/11, Hasan Gafoor became the target of a sustained media campaign inspired and managed by an influential group of police officers. Now a year later, after the former Mumbai Police chief got provoked by a journalist into commenting on four juniors, the Maharashtra Home Minister R.R.Patil has promised "strict disciplinary action" against Gafoor to send out the message that "no one will be spared for misconduct".

Patil maintained that he went through the 26/11 police wireless records after Gafoor reportedly said four officers had under-performed, and "didn't find anything that shows them to be at fault."

But Vinita Kamte, the wife of a slain officer, used the RTI Act to access just a small part of the same records for her book To The Last Bullet. And what did she find?

That the Additional Commissioner (Crime Branch) was sent to Cama Hospital with half a dozen armed constables to rescue the injured IPS officer Sadananad Date from the Lashkar duo Ajmal Kasab and Ismail Khan; that instead of going there he 'stayed put on the terrace of the Anjuman School (opposite the rear gate of Cama) for over an

hour until 00.30 a.m.'; and that much after the terrorists had shot Vinita's husband Ashok Kamte, the ATS chief Hemant Karkare, Crime Branch

Inspector Vijay Salaskar, and four constables, this officer 'chose to leave the Anjuman School... and took the opposite direction (from Cama) to exit from the Times of India (building) side, even as the three officers were lying in a pool of blood'.

Vinita Kamte doesn't name this 'Addl CP' in the book, though she did in a later media interview. But surely Patil knows that the Crime Branch no. 2 is none other than Deven Bharti, one of the famous foursome for whose sake he has decided to punish Gafoor. Does Patil believe then that just as the Lashkar onslaught was "a little incident...in a big city", Bharti's terrace caper was a normal midnight outing?

But why marvel only at Patil's Alice in Wonderland logic? Bharti and the three others were also defended by 'supercop' Julio Ribeiro as "outstanding officers...some of the best in the department". It doesn't stop there. Even while the Ram Pradhan Committee damned Gafoor by constantly thumping the laughably incongruous Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) police manual (never mind that it was scrapped immediately after 26/11), it relied on these same four officers to brand him as a 'poor leader'. So maybe now we will be told that Bharti's strange behaviour that night (there was more, but enough!) was SOP.

What was not SOP was the dedication and courage displayed by Karkare and Kamte in response to the call that another IPS officer was injured and under fire from terrorists, and needed support.



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They died fighting. But in the topsy-turvy world of the Maharashtra government, they died because "they didn't understand the gravity of the situation" (what a top minister told Vinita Kamte during a condolence visit). And in the malevolent view of a few policemen, "they got Ashoka Chakras for nothing...just for taking bullets" — (this was what provoked Gafoor during his ill-fated encounter with the journalist).

Altogether nine policemen died that night before Kasab was captured. A few policemen may have stayed indoors until the army came, or wandered aimlessly, but many confronted the terrorists despite being shockingly ill-equipped and untrained for the challenge. As a result, for the first time a Pakistani jihadi was caught during an urban terror attack, a tremendous boost for New Delhi in its campaign to expose the India-hating terror network across the border.

And where was Gafoor throughout the night of 26/11? Soon after the terrorists struck, he set up his command post in the field, outside the Hotel Trident. This helped him to quickly and correctly gauge that the scale and ferocity of the onslaught was such that only specially trained commandos could combat it. Otherwise, it could result in a bigger tragedy.

The Lashkar fighters were displaying considerable tactical agility and acumen, and were using not just pistols and AK-47s but also hand grenades and RDX bombs. Gafoor himself narrowly escaped being felled first by a bomb in the hotel driveway and then by a grenade hurled at his car.

Until the commandos arrived, the best his men could hope to achieve was to contain the terrorists, rescue hotel guests, and assist the injured.

Like many others, I sat all night watching the horrific drama unfold on TV. Occasionally, I would catch sight of Gafoor at the Trident. I was startled to see that Mumbai's police chief was without a bullet-proof jacket. When I met him later, I remonstrated. His reply, I thought, was typical of an officer who is down-to-earth yet innovative, and always ready to lead from the front.

"I had put on my bulletproof vest when I reached the Trident," Gafoor said matter-of-factly. "But then I saw that my men were falling back, they didn't have any such vests. As the police chief, I felt I had to set an example. So I took it off."

This was probably another violation of the SOP. But is it at all possible that during his amazing, lathi-swinging surge toward the silver Skoda, Asst Inspector Tukaram Ombale, the policeman who finally pinned down Kasab, may have felt a little extra motivation knowing, as he would through the police wireless, that further up the road his own chief was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his men confronting the terrorists? (In fact, Kasab's car narrowly skirted Gafoor's command post, from where orders first went out to stop the Skoda.)

No police chief anywhere in India has been indicted or removed after a terror strike. Gafoor is the first. Now he faces severe punishment that, according to reports, could include demotion or dismissal. Will the Queen of Hearts shout, "Off with his head!"?

Misguided media critics of the Mumbai police's performance on 26/11 should get out of wonderland and examine a simple fact — what the Indian Army and the Navy commandos did that night. The Army, perhaps sensibly, did not take on the Pakistani jihadis inside either the Taj or the Trident-Oberoi hotels, but maintained 'perimeter security'. The Navy's fearsome Marcos commandos refused to fight at the Oberoi, but did go inside the old Taj. A few hours later they announced they had killed two terrorists. But all four Lashkar gunmen were still active when the NSG arrived. So who had the Marcos killed?

Heavily-armed soldiers without the instincts and skills of a force like the NSG which is specially trained and equipped to combat fanatical gunmen inside large, civilian-occupied buildings (the toughest of all commando operations) can do more harm than good. But in the inspired media campaign coming from within the force, only the lathi-wielding Mumbai cop, a shadow of his former self due to years of neglect and political interference, is portrayed as the villain, and the police chief vilified.

Even with the NSG, a significant detail always goes unmentioned. The fighting arm of this special counter-terrorism force consists of commandos drawn from the Army. The inductees from the police are used for security duties, such as guarding politicians. Though the NSG is always headed by a police officer, it discovered early on that its police recruits are neither physically nor mentally capable of lasting the full stretch in its commando training programme. In Mumbai too it was the slain Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, Havaldar Gajendra Singh and their Army comrades who fought and killed the Lashkar terrorists.

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After taking over as commissioner in February 2008, Gafoor was worried about his ragtag force's ability to counter a terrorist strike. But he was starved of funds. So he improvised. Former British commandos whom he had befriended as Air India's security chief were invited to train a select group. Kamte was given charge of this programme. The famous Israeli-run ICTS aviation security company trained Mumbai airport police on essentials such as how to profile passengers or identify a suicide bomber. The training was free of cost, since ICTS was looking for an entry into the Indian market. His most ambitious project was to modernise the antiquated police control room through a citywide electronic surveillance system. (After its mysterious metamorphosis into a privately-sponsored proposal, the CCTV project languishes.) But in a police force bedeviled by corruption and crass careerism, men like Gafoor, Karkare and Kamte (two officers he was professionally close to — he called Kamte "my right arm") remained 'outsiders'.

When the so-called 'Deccan Mujahideen' claimed credit for 26/11 in a spurious email, the media, ever hungry for dramatic contrasts, missed an act. Leading the brave policemen confronting the fake Hyderabad Muslims was a genuine one, Hasan Gafoor. This was one more message from Mumbai to the Lashkar's sponsors in Pakistan. Now he too will be a victim. I can only hang my head in shame.

Now based in Delhi, Maseeh Rahman worked in Mumbai for 25 years as a reporter, editor and India Today bureau chief.

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