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R D Pradhan handing over High Level Enquiry Committee report on 26/11 terror attack on Mumbai, to the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra Ashok Chavan.

COVER UP of 26/11 FACTS: NO ANSWERS IN RAM PRADHAN COMMITTEE REPORT

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By Kartik Lokhande

Though the media leak of Ram Pradhan Committee report was much debated not only in Maharashtra but also

nationwide, it appears that the content of the report has failed in drawing equal attention during debate. After 26/11 terror attack on Mumbai, people were expecting that the report of High Level Enquiry Committee (HLEC) or Ram Pradhan Committee would shed some light on shortcomings in the Police Department, necessary steps would be initiated to become better prepared to thwart any such terror attack in future. However, the report leaves one with more questions than answers. There are contradictions in observations and till now no one has been held accountable for what led to inept handling of 26/11 situation. In effect, it is nothing more than a 'whitewash'.

When the much-awaited Ram Pradhan Committee report was tabled in Maharashtra Legislative Assembly during winter session in December 2009, people across the country felt that the report would outline the changes to be made in the security apparatus of the country's commercial capital – Mumbai. Besides, it was expected that the committee report would indict the political fathers as well as the top cops and bureaucrats for shortcomings in security preparedness of the Maximum City. However, the committee report proved to be a great disappointment, a dud.

After going through the report of HLEC on 26/11 or Ram Pradhan Committee, one feels that the report itself is full of contradictions. With its limited scope of probing into police preparedness and handling of 26/11 situation, the committee also failed in collecting vital documents including the Intelligence alerts sent by the Intelligence Bureau. Further, it also failed in recording depositions of members of the public who were irked the most by another attack on Mumbai. The panel was headed by R D Pradhan, former Governor and Union Home Secretary, and V Balachandran, former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, was its member.

There are several inadequacies in the report, which make a strong case for another probe being ordered into 26/11 by the Central Government well-defined terms of reference. The most unfortunate thing about the report is that it does not elaborate on the terms of reference. In fact, in its note for the Chief Minister, the HLEC report states, "As the HLEC was appointed pursuant to the Chief Minister's assurance to the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly on December 27, 2008, in reply to the debate on Adjournment Motion, we have carefully gone through relevant debates and specific points raised by Honourable Members. In fact, verbatim records of these debates have a useful starting point to address several matters that have agitated the public about handling of 26/11." It shows clearly that the committee did not take any extra effort in identifying the real issues that had led to inept handling of 26/11 situation. It relied on the debates in Legislative Assembly alone, to start probe.

The committee member V Balachandran had defended the report stating that at least eight serious lapses, 16 systemic failures were pointed out by the committee. Besides, it had made at least 24 recommendations to the Government. However, a reading of the report reveals that the committee has merely reduced its task to presenting a narration of events that unfolded during 26/11 siege of Mumbai, much like a narration of a drama. It also raises a question as to why did it not hold anybody accountable for the lapses and systemic failures. This

also raises another question as to whether the committee was constituted merely to complete a formality on the Government's part.

Apart from fixing accountability of police as well as bureaucratic top brass, leave alone political leadership, the committee has failed miserably in presenting a clear picture also. As a result, the committee report is full of contradictions. Here are a couple of instances:

- On page 6, the report states that the committee had not found any serious lapses in the conduct of any individual officer. Whereas, in its covering letter addressed to the Chief Minister and signed by R D Pradhan himself, it is clearly mentioned, "We have found serious lapses on part of the Commissioner of Police, Mumbai, in handling the multi-pronged attack. There was absence of overt leadership on the part of Shri Hasan Gafoor, the CP, and lack of visible Command and Control at the CP's office."

- On page 8, the committee report states, "Despite lack of any specific alert from the Central Intelligence Agencies, it would not be correct to conclude that the Mumbai/Maharashtra Police did not take such Intelligence reports, as available, seriously." However, the same report, on page 34-35 mentions, "The DGP sent to the Committee copies of 20 Intelligence inputs received between 1/12/2007 and 13/10/2008 from different agencies vide his letter dated 12/1/2009. On a query from the Committee whether any specific mention of sea-route was mentioned in any of these Intelligence reports, a further list of 5 Intelligence alerts from August 2005 to February 27, 2007 was sent by him on 27/1/2009. The Commissioner of Police sent copies of 26 Intelligence alerts received by him from MHA, IB etc vide his letter 22/2/2009. The Committee analysed all these Intelligence inputs from the characteristics of the attack which took place on 26/11/2008: (a) Sea-borne attack (b) Multiple and simultaneous attacks (c) Commando action as against the usual experience of Mumbai of being attacked only through timed explosive devices (d) Jewish Targets and (e) Leopold which were specific to 26/11/2008."

Interestingly, while replying to the committee, the Additional Chief Secretary (Home) and Principal Secretary (Home) stated that they had not received any Intelligence input from Central Agencies. Even the Chief Secretary had stated that no specific Intelligence input was received from Central Intelligence Agencies on 26/11 terrorist attacks. Here, the committee has not only contradicted its earlier observation, but has also overlooked the case for fixing responsibility.

Another instance where the committee has failed to hold anybody responsible is on Page 62. Here, the committee observes that the police were taken by surprise when Nariman House was attacked. However, it mentions that three Intelligence alerts were received from IB regarding possibility of Jewish targets being attacked. Though there was no specific mention of Nariman House in the alerts, it is surprising to know from the committee report that DCP SB-II, who is also In-charge of Foreigners' Division, or local police station had no idea that there was a Jewish sect residing in Nariman House. It surely raises question mark over the efficiency

of the police machinery. But, sadly, the committee has again failed miserably in fixing responsibility.

The report states that the control room 'could not closely track movements of terrorists or police teams in their pursuit', but quickly adds, 'because simultaneous events were happening in that area and senior officers present on the spot were not keeping the CR informed of their tactical plans.' It points out that Mumbai Police were handicapped during 26/11 attacks because it lacked weapons, effective bullet-proof jackets and communication equipment. However, it shies away from bluntly blasting the role of Mantralaya-based bureaucrats in not equipping the cops with bullet-proof jackets, arms or ammunition. It also hesitates in making clear observations regarding lack of firing practice to cops.

Vinita Kamte, widow of martyr police officer Ashok Kamte, had criticised publicly the committee stand that it was not supposed to talk to members of the public. Vinita Deshmukh, who has co-authored the book 'The Last Bullet' along with Vinita Kamte, also went on record saying that the committee had records of control room call records, which revealed that no help had reached Cama Hospital scene for 40 long minutes, but the report has given a virtual clean chit to the officers handling the control room.

One can find out several other contradictions and weak-kneed approach of the committee in fixing accountability of bureaucrats, cops, politicians. The committee report also appears to have been completed in a hurry. In the last four pages, the report contains scanned images of maps of Hotel Taj, Nariman House, Hotel Oberoi/Trident and a simple map of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai. However, they may not be of significance to anybody for sheer lack of clarity of images and footnotes.

Probably, realising these aspects, security expert B Raman -- who also headed Counter Terrorism of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) -- was quoted as saying that 'there were many obvious failures on the part of the police.' He further said, 'instead of examining the failures critically, the committee decided to whitewash them.' Recently, he even recommended a panel being appointed by the Central Government to conduct a comprehensive, fresh enquiry, which would also fix accountability.

Even the former Commissioner of Police M N Singh was quoted as saying, "The Pradhan Committee should have looked into entire security set-up including the Intelligence, Navy, Coast Guard and politicians. Pradhan Committee spoke about Intelligence reports warning of a possible attack in the city via sea-route, but it should have also looked into why the reports remained buried under some files at the Mantralaya." He even went on commenting, "I think Ram Pradhan Committee should have been given very narrow terms of references (so) that a lot of things remain under wraps and we do not find the complete truth."

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