

## The Naxalite

IT was the police driver who drove the cart to the police station, which had a security ring of barbed wire and trees around it. All those who saw him driving the cart in his police uniform suppressed their mirth and looked aside as if in fear. But the constable who was on sentry duty with a riffle in hand burst out laughing abruptly. The police driver looked down and drove the cart on without a word because, even though he was in uniform, he was only a driver. After releasing the bull from the cart and tethering it to the cartwheel he entered the station. They were questioning the Carter. For a moment he watched them and then looked at the cart and the bull as if unable to decide whether it was the same Carter.

"Name?"

'Ratnakar."

" Age?"

1140".

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Employment?"

"Carter."

"Residence?"

"In the cart."

"I am asking you, where you were born and where you are living?"

"I was born in Parlakhemundi and I reside in the cart".

"Have you studied?"

Yes

"Up to which class?"

"Matriculation."

The constable rested for a while. Without the suspect's knowledge, he scrutinized the suspect from head to toe- from the thickly grown matted black hair to the beard, the occasional Grey hairs appearing prominently at places in it, the mouth, discolored due to betel chewing and the two rows of blackened teeth. He saw that the suspect's deep set small, keen eyes were directed on to his badge of office. "During that time, when you had studied so much, why didn't you seek a job?"

"Am doing a job."

"Am asking you why not a job keeping with your education.

"Is there something like that?"

The constable, who did not expect such a reply, still holding the pen between the fingers, hit the Carter across the face twice. The Carter easily tolerated the blows, without any concern and quite

unruffled. His two small, lump like, deep set eyes were still directed on to the constable's official badge. They were devoid of any feelings.

The constable thought that the Carter would pick up and return the ball-point pen that flew of his hand. He waited for a moment and then like a person possessed by the devil sprang up and grabbing the carter's hair with both hands shook him violently.

'Remember well, answer the questions only asked for... don't talk like a pundit and try to show your erudition and get killed unnecessarily.. remember well where you are now.'

The carter stood still as if he didn't understand anything. Then the constable went as if he was going for some other purpose and surreptitiously picked up the pen from where it had fallen. Coming back to his chair he sat down and made himself comfortable. He wondered for a while what the next question should be. Because of his lack of experience in this type of questioning and because the answers were unlike those given by other suspects to the usual series of questions, he was slightly uneasy and was also angry.

He placed the ballpoint pen, which was before him on the police notebook, and closing it got up and left without looking at the carter. The carter was standing as before in the same place. From there he saw the old jeep parked opposite the police station building and the cart beyond it with the bull tethered to its wheel. The bull was frothing from its mouth. In a moment the picture almost faded and he saw people with turbans tied round their heads briskly walking past the station, stooping as it were without even glancing once in its direction.

"My job suits me. Another sees it as unsuitable. Does anyone do a job in keeping with his education? I have passed the matric with English as my third language. I speak Dakhini (local Odia language) to shop-owners. Hari Beura who studied with me and who used to cut out the pictures of Madhubala and Other Pretty female film stars from the newspapers and Paste them on books is today minister of the state for culture. I, Who solved pure mathematics problems the whole day on demi-paper, am driving a cart- Questions should be asked as to how all these people got to these positions and not about the suitability of my job", He thought silently. "Ha, now sit-down, sit down and answer my questions.

He felt that not only the harsh and rough tone of the constable but also his demeanor had changed for the better. The Carter wondered why the constable now wore the cap that was on the table. When the constable saw the Carter making himself comfortable on the bench without any sign of fear, as if it was his own Place, and then placing his hands on the table and bending forward, he felt as if it was the carter who was going to question him. He thought that he should order him to remove his hands from the table but he didn't do so. He took the book again to see what his last question was

'Who are your closest friends

"The bull and the dog.

"Accha, who are they?'

'The bull that draws the cart and the dog that lives in the sack."

The constable got up. He stepped round the long table and came behind the short wall. The carter looked behind, puzzled. Then he felt as if his upper arms were held in a vice and almost immediately he was dragged over the short wall to the inner hall. He was pulled with such force that when his hip struck against the wall, the plaster broke into several pieces. At the same time, the carter was given a blow on the face with the right hand that could not have been easily borne by a person.

The carter was expecting the blow. Bearing the pain in the hip, he bent backwards and avoided it. With the force of the missed blow, the constable went skidding along and fell on his hands and knees. He glared at the carter through his arms with his face hanging down. The carter turned his head backwards and looking at his back, he rubbed his hip region with his right hand. At this time another constable came to the hall whistling and rubbing his hands together to go out for some reason or other. As if he understood what had taken place by instinct". "Shall I give him the works?" he asked, twisting the Carter's hand backward and pushing him away.

By that time the other constable had got up and was ready. He locked the carter on the rib cage. When the carter was thrown backwards the other constable bent forward, clapped his hands and jumping up kicked his face. The face that had got tanned and seasoned by getting wet in the rain and drying in the sun swelled to bursting point. When the carter brought the right middle finger and touched his face, a kick to his lower abdomen brought him down like a felled tree.

When he regained consciousness, he was in the lock-up. He had an unbearable urge to urinate. He felt as if his ribs had been chopped and powdered. He felt so much pain in his chest that he failed to take a long breath. For some reason or other there were some tears in his eyes. He bent with difficulty and wiped his eyes and forehead.

From time to time the sound of jeeps arriving and departing and also foot-steps could be heard. Then the sound of someone whistling, and then complete silence. He remembered the bull, the dog and the cart. He quietly held the iron bars of the lock up and raised himself with difficulty and looked over the short wall towards the road. The bull stood as before with his head raised. Though the two protruding arms of the cart in front were on the ground he felt as if the back of the cart was too high. He wondered whether the two beams were broken. Then he decided that a pillar in the verandah interfered with his view and caused this aberration. He expected the dog to be sleeping in the sack tied under the cart like a hammock.

But in the afternoon no one questioned him. The constable, who brought others and pushed them in, did not even look in his direction when he locked the cell. In the evening, he was taken to the office of the OIC. There was another with him in civilian dress. The two of them discussed in English and started questioning. The carter said that the bull and the dog had to be given water. They summoned a constable and instructed him to feed and give water to the animals.

"We have to feed and give water to bulls and dogs also." The constable muttered as he was departing.

"Did you cook food for the Naxalites that night

"I cooked food for several but I don't know whether they were Naxalites. "

"Why did you feel like cooking food for them

"I was getting ready to cook my evening meal. They asked me to cook some food for them also. As the pots and pans I had were small, they brought big pots. I cooked, they too helped.'

"Didn't you know any of them earlier

"No"

"Is it a practice with you to cook for unknown people

'If it is hunger, not only a human being, but even animal would be fed according to the means available."

"That was not your home, was it?"

"I have no home. The seven days are spent in seven places. In the evening the goods are unloaded at a Haat (weekly fair), the next day when the fair is over, the goods are collected and taken to the next fair."

"Why did they come in search of you to cook their food?' "That I don't know-on Saturdays I go to the stream - I bathe the bull well - I bathe the dog too - there is a shade more pleasant than a house. It is on that day I oil the wheels of the cart. I apply *Jada* oil on the horns and the forehead of the bull as a safeguard from ticks and flies. By that time I am very hungry, but cooking for one person is very boring. When you chat while cooking you don't feel the boredom.'

"With whom do you talk?"

"With the bull and the dog."

"In which language?"

"According to the time I speak in any language that comes to my mouth. They don't require languages as we do, they understand from the manner in which we speak. The dog knows when he is asked to bathe, yet he does not run and jump into the water at once. When he is asked to bathe, he runs in the opposite direction - then you have to say a four letter word or give one or two sticks, then it turns and jumps into the stream."

A deep silence then ensued. After a while the officer in the civil dress released a deep sigh and said that they should hold a parade and finish it.

A constable got seven or eight young men to stand in a row. Among them were the bearded and those without even the slightest growth of a moustache. But all of them had two features in common. One was that their eyebrows, noses, lips were swollen, disfigured and had recently bled. The other was, no one was fat or well built.

"Of those who had meals that day, is anyone here?"

He looked at their faces carefully. Even if there were, should he tell? He is not used to gazing at or looking keenly at people. He was not used to inquiring about the antecedents of others. Everyone was the same to him.

"Then you don't know anyone? Go and put him in."

The constable almost dragged him and pushed him into the lock up. With his urge to urinate and pain in the chest and ribs being so unbearable, he thought he would lose consciousness. After a day or two thirsts, hunger, the stench, wailing, four letter words, all became the accepted, usual form for him.

"Though I urinate here today, when my dog wants to urinate would go to a distance and look at me and then when it feels that there was no harm in it only would it do so. My bull does not defecate or urinate in the water. He would attend to both the jobs before bathing. During past few years I lived single minded. Nothing has happened for me to think deeply or to regret anything. My domains were the fields I pass once a week, the bridges, the culverts and the herds of buffaloes wallowing in the mud, the storks flying over the field, the flights of parrots, teak groves, the mountain tops that embraced the ash colored clouds and the rain and the sunshine. The bull and the dog are my friends. I have spoken most with the bull. I recite verses and quatrains to him with these thoughts--- he thought anew of the bull. The copper encasements of the horns should be polished bright and the wasted shoes fixed anew. To shoe him he has to be put down and harassed.

That day afternoon he was put in a jeep and taken to his village. The police wanted to inspect his belongings. The elder brother brought a fairly large trunk. He was asked to open it. As he opened it, the carter remembered his childhood days. This was the box he took to the school boarding. He wondered whether the smell of new clothes, books, soap and powder that emanated from it then was still there. He pinched his nostrils and inhaled bending forward.

The carter was again put in to the jeep. Early next morning several armed groups started out from the police station. The suspects were transported to another location, probably to Brahmapur. Till evening no one received even a drop of water. The constable who came at this time said, "The fool was asked to be released today - I nearly forgot that." He opened the door of the lock up.

'You go anywhere you feel like.' The carter raised himself slowly and squatted. He placed his palms on his knees and stood up and looked forward to the road for a while. The cart was where it stood, getting scorched.

"Dibakar, my bull?"

"Oho! Is there a bigger bull than you? Save your skin and go at least now, without giving more trouble. There is only one hour for you, you might be shot in the dark.'

The other policemen cast various remarks at him, played the fool and continued to drink. He didn't understand anything, neither was he worried about them. He thought only about his bull. The thought that the bull would be behind the police station grazing and raising its head every now and then looking out for him, occurred to him. At the same time he felt sorry because the bull would have grown leaner during these three or four days. But remembering that today he would again emerge into the normal world, he felt extremely happy forgetting even all his pains.

"Are you going out or going back to the lock-up "To go I must have my bull.'

"Why can't a bull like you draw the cart?"

"What I am saying is that I want my bull back.'

"You go and look for the bull! When these things happen to humans today, what would not happen to bulls, man?"

Other policemen around clapped their hands and started laughing. There was nothing to indicate that he heard or saw any of that. The eyes in the swollen and bruised black face looked as if they had become smaller and red. Taking long strides he approached the constable as if rounding up some animals. Without removing his eyes from him the constable moved backward towards the machine gun on the table. The Carter's right hand suddenly shot out as if by magic and pulled the constable towards him. Holding him by the elbow and turning him round he pushed the constable who got thrown against the short wall and fell there. Though the short size machinegun was not a familiar object in the Carter's hands, he liked its compact handiness. He realized that when he was a cadet in school, he had never aimed a gun at a human being bit only at the target against a sandy hill. This time he is...