

Dead are asking: who killed us?



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It has been half a month since Risso Tari, Biki Ruja and Tsering Wangdi didn't return home. They left their homes to join a protest movement involving indigenous people rights to protect their land. Their friends and everyone else returned. They should have been home by now. But, could not and would never be able to return alive in flesh and blood—they were killed. They are dead and buried six feet under. Not even their families got the chance to say final goodbyes.

It was time for the public to gather in solidarity to remember those lives taken, remind the State about the inhumane act against the protesters. Many hundreds have shown their love and support by joining the candlelight march; some wrinkled elders, school-going children, teenagers, youths. Precisely, it was a collective effort of the grieving families to host a candlelight memorial for the dead.

Each of us in a queue divided into two rows with a candle. The Sun was already setting, when we'd started marching from Akashdeep. And darkness set in by the time we reached the memorial spot where one of the victims was buried. There were long queues of hundreds of flickering candle flames, fighting against harsh wind, lights visible even from far away.

And, as we passed the familiar roads, there were bystanders who kept clicking photos with their phone cameras, those in vehicles, in shops, people stopped with whatever they were doing and regarded the marchers, passer-by joined, and the length kept increasing. We passed the road, which few weeks ago was filled with angry protesters—we passed the Civil Secretariat, couldn't have missed the heavy deployment of armed forces, and reached the gathering site, additional armed forces again. Although, it was a peaceful march, but, it was a scream towards them- we won't allow license killing to go unnoticed in this land.

The grieving families spoke in unison. They refused the compensations or any other offers from the State government. Human lives matter. Why should ordinary people lives be less valued? All they demanded was to bring their killers to justice. There should be a face of the killers. There should be a chargesheet against security personnel involved. The dead cannot rest in peace if the shooters get on with their life as if nothing happened. You have wrecked unarmed, innocent people's lives.

Since the last bandh call in Arunachal Pradesh, the State government withdrew its proposition of tabling the Permanent Residence Certificate (PRC) bill in the State assembly. But, the families refused ex-gratia of Rs 20 lakhs and other offers on behalf of the dead (rejected by families). Because, they are yet to get the answers: Who killed them? Were the protestors armed? Why there was no use of water cannon? Who sanctioned for firing live bullets? What was their crime? Why were not they given chance to defend themselves before the law? Why was Risso Tari's dead body dropped at the Civil Secretariat? Why Tsering Wangdi's dead body was taken away to another state hospital without informing the family? The State continues to shield the murderers. Hiding them behind the uniform, we have been taught to respect.

All we ever wanted was to protect our rights over land, forest, our identity. Now, families of the dead and the injured are left to live with the reality. Regardless of the countless candlelight marches, many more protests, the lives of Risso Tari, Biki Ruja, and Tsering Wangdi would not be back. It can never bring them back alive. Their absence has definitely created a huge gap and things will never be the same again.

Wailings of the loved ones' still echo in the hospital corridors, still echo in our mind. We cannot even comprehend the pain of losing ones' son, brother, husband so suddenly. It didn't come with a warning. Their pain is beyond tears. This cannot be unseen.

I, an indigenous of this land stand with the victim's families. Like them, I am against anybody giving our shared pain a political colour. We seek justice. We want the truth. Who killed them? Who killed us?

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