

Keralites losing their Heads!

By Dr G Sreekumar Menon, Commissioner of Central Excise

IT's a long Karmic journey, from the verdant green fields of Malappuram in Kerala, to the sandy dunes of the Saudi deserts, to offer one's neck, to the executioner's brutal blade. One is reminded of the great philosopher Seneca's words about 'death', that it is "a punishment for some, to some a gift, and to many a favour". Unfortunate are the ones who have to face death as a punishment. What quaint karma is it that leads these unfortunate beings from the peaceful quiet of their green villages to the unforgiving blistering desert sands to have a tryst with a terrible destiny?

Getting caught in the narcotic drugs game can be a messy affair. Drug-related offences are punishable by death in twenty-four countries. Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Darussalam, Burma, People's Republic of China, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mauritius, Qatar, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Syria, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and the United States.

Execution is carried out by shooting, hanging, stoning, beheading and in the United States by intravenous injection, and gassing.

In Saudi Arabia it means certain public beheading, as gullible Keralites are finding out. Saudi Arabia follows a strict interpretation of Islamic law that prescribes the death penalty for murder, apostasy, rape, drug trafficking, highway robbery and sabotage. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest executions rates in the world, both in terms of people killed and in relation to its population.

About two thirds of those executed in Saudi Arabia are foreigners. Saudi Justice is harsh in its treatment of foreign workers, particularly those from poorer countries of Middle East, Africa and Asia, who make up about a quarter of the Saudi population. **These workers are vulnerable to abuse from their employers as well as from the police. Arrested foreign nationals are often tricked or coerced into signing a confession in Arabic that they do not understand.**

There is a growing tribe in Malappuram district - a tribe of old and poor parents who have lost their sons; wives who have lost their husbands; children who have lost their fathers all to the merciless gallows of Saudi Arabia. All of them were executed on charges of narcotics smuggling which invites the death penalty (often public beheading) under Arabic laws. **Foreigners condemned to death in Saudi Arabia are typically unaware of their execution and have no advance notice of their date of execution.** In most cases, the condemned prisoners do not even know that their trial had been concluded. The latest additions awarded executions are Hamza Aboobacker, 48 and Sheikh Mastan, 42, hailing from Kerala's Malapuram and Kozhikode districts respectively who have been convicted by a Damam Shariat Court. Unfortunately, most of these condemned victims were job-seekers in the Gulf who became pawns in the brown-sugar smuggling racket that's **spiralling out of control in the north Kerala districts of Malappuram and Kozhikode.** India has replaced Pakistan as the nerve-centre of drug trafficking to the Gulf countries. While in the past it was the Pakistanis, Yemenis or Afghans who were mostly caught for drug trafficking in Saudi Arabia, the recent years have seen a rapid rise in the number of Indians executed. Malappuram district in Kerala may be having the dubious distinction of being the district which has sent the maximum number of people to the gallows in Saudi Arabia. **In Saudi Arabia, Indian do not get legal support, are not allowed to hire lawyers and do not get international legal aid.**

The actual number of the executed are not available as Saudi Arabia does not disclose the relevant details. But according to prisoners who have returned after jail terms in Saudi Arabia, at least about 100 Indians are in prisons awaiting capital punishment. All

those executed were caught at Jeddah airport by anti-narcotics squads which found brown sugar hidden in their shoes, pickle-bottles and suitcases. Most of the Keralites beheaded were naïve, vulnerable and gullible couriers that drug traffickers used. Passengers also fell into the trap of drug pushers who would pass on a packaged drug consignment at airports with the plea it was medicine meant for their relatives in the Gulf. Often their travel agent would slip the stuff into their bags or pockets. Many in Malappuram feel there is a huge increase in drug running. Brown sugar is freely available here, most of it comes from across the Kutch border and Mumbai, hidden in trucks carrying marble from Rajasthan. Others point to increasing Islamic fundamentalism in the district and its possible links with the narcotics trade carried out by jihadis from Afghanistan or Pakistan from where the drugs originate. Certainly, a cocktail of factors - **fundamentalism, illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, migration to the Gulf - has set up the ideal conditions for the business to explode.**

We have to address an uncomfortable question as to how is it that these people avoid detection at our airports but get picked up in alien destinations effortlessly? There are a plethora of agencies working in our airports with overlapping jurisdictions and functions. That such clandestine activity has eluded detection by all agencies is quite alarming. In this age of terrorism we need to keep a strict vigil at all entry/exit points. There appears to be a strong case for enhanced Customs scrutiny and surveillance in airport departure zones.

What lines to write, in memory of those unfortunate souls, who met a cruel fate, at the executioner's hands, and, whose bodies could not return, to dissolve and disappear, in the peace and quiet of their villages ? Their tragic fate unknown to our countrymen, not newsworthy for our media, ignored by our bureaucracy, and, not even considered worthy for a political debate ! To these unfortunate souls I dedicate this website epitaph.

"Men tire themselves in pursuit of rest

Like one that on a lonesome road

Doth walk in fear and dread

And having once turned round walks on

And turns no more his head

Because he knows a frightful fiend

Doth close behind him tread"

- **S.T.Coleridge**

(The views expressed are strictly personal)