

## Is encounter silver bullet against crime?

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CHENNAI: The Guduvanchery double killing in police encounter has brought a familiar debate back to centre stage: Is an encounter a deterrence? That police encounters always coincide with spikes in law and order disturbances is a point not to be missed. This time, too, a few gory daytime murders done in full public view recently evoked some disquiet among civil society and prompted opposition leaders such as AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami and BJP chief K Annamalai to mock the state police.

A few random incidents did fuel the perception of a crumbling law and order scenario. On July 2, busy Velachery froze when autorickshaw driver Dhinesh was chased by a five-member machete-wielding gang, which managed to corner him inside a provision store and hacked him. Amidst his cries for help the gang chased away onlookers and killed him.

On July 6, a gang of five hurled a country-made bomb at history-sheeter Lokesh hardly 100 metres from the Chengalpet court complex. He was then hacked to death, causing panic in the district. Token Raja, an associate of history-sheeter CD Mani, was hacked to death in full public view at a slum near Mylapore on July 9. He had about 25 criminal cases, including murders. The July 19 murder of a woman fruit vendor right on the Saidapet suburban railway platform, again while many were witnessing the horror, by two men also shook the city.

On July 21, a grocery shop owner's son Yogeshwaran was kidnapped, confined and attacked by a gang – all because he refused to pay 'rowdy mamool' to

them. Though he managed to escape, he was badly injured and robbed. In the last four months alone, at least three PMK functionaries were murdered in Chengalpet district, bordering Tambaram.

The double kill by the police comes when things looked like spiralling out of control. Though serving and former police officers are sharply divided on encounters, just as the general public is, they are unanimous that they have a chilling effect on criminal gangs at least for some time.

“Top rowdies either lie low, or shift their base to other states,” said a serving officer who did not wish to be identified.

Retired DGP-rank officer S R Jangid says though encounters happen in self-defence, the collateral benefit is sharp decline in criminal activities. “If a right man is killed under right circumstances, it creates fear in the minds of other criminals,” Jangid told TOI.

M Karunanidhi, a retired SP, said, “It should not be a planned killing, but retaliation should be swift when cops come under attack or threat.” Another retired DGP-rank officer, R Natraj, however, said that encounter had never been a deterrent. It is a myth, he said.

Henri Tiphagne, advocate and executive director of a human rights organization, People’s Watch, said it is wrong to celebrate encounter killings. “Most of the encounter killings are staged ones even though police claim they only acted in retaliation. They should improve the quality of investigation and prosecution instead of resorting to such shortcuts,” he said.

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