

Sting operations: A question of ethics

- K S R Menon*

Nowadays, sting operations by newspapers and television channels have become very popular. These are undercover operations carried out by a journalist to trap a corrupt official, a criminal or, more importantly, politician. In some cases, such operations have succeeded in exposing unlawful activities which would have otherwise gone unheeded. But more recently some of the operations have raised questions of journalistic ethics.

Does the end justify the means, however, unsavory the means are? That is the issue being debated. For instance, in the process of capturing a criminal can the journalist resort to activities that in itself appear to border on the illegal? In the rush to increase circulation or Television Rating Points (TRPs), how illegal can a sting be?

For instance, sometime ago, a news magazine hired a prostitute to influence an official and when he was trapped, the media went to town with the expose. If someone who ordinarily would not have committed a wrong is enticed to stray, can he alone be blamed?

Does not the enticer share some responsibility as the agent who provoked the crime? In this case is the journalist who employs illegal means an exposé or an abettor?

Another question arises when a media house employs sting with an ulterior motive. It has been alleged that some media outfits conduct sting only against certain political parties. If the media has an axe to grind and the sting is used to further that end, can that be justified?

There are other stings which have been called into question for not only unethical objectives but plain criminal activity like blackmailing. Recently a television channel conducted a sting against a big business house on their unlawful business activities. The business house in turn did a counter sting to show that the channel reporters were trying to blackmail it. Even though the charges were never conclusively proved, as the reporters were arrested, the sting raised several eyebrows. In fact the allegations of blackmail

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have been leveled at purveyors of yellow journalism as well

Encouraging and exploiting foibles in men and women and using illegal means to tempt people into crimes for the purpose of sensational reporting may not be the best of journalistic practices. Law enforcement agencies may have a certain legal sanction to do this to catch hardened criminals but whether journalists have the same privilege is doubtful.

While there are not hard and fast rules governing this, it is for the journalists to decide where their journalistic liberties and prerogatives end. A rule of the thumb is that while trying to expose a crime, no one should

resort to another crime.

The easy availability of concealed, miniature audio and video equipment like the pin-hole camera, wireless recording instrument, and telephone tapping instruments have made stings a cinch these days. But over and above all that if one employs call girls or give bribes, there is a risk that it can also boomerang. It is wise to remember that when some politicians tried to expose their counterparts by giving bribes, the bribe givers were sent to jail while nothing happened to the bribe takers. It is another story that ultimately after months of litigation, the bribe givers, or the sting operators, were discharged by the court.



India has nurtured a variety of spiritually based dharmic traditions over many centuries and many millennia, marking the unique contribution of its civilization to the world at large. These Dharmic traditions have lived together in peace and mutual respect, sharing a common Dharmic culture and a common aspiration to the highest truth. India-origin Dharmic traditions have been shared by the surrounding great countries of Asia and have become integrated with the native cultures of many Asian countries as well, which have much in common with them, like Chinese Taoism and Japanese Shinto. We could say that Dharma is the light of Asia and the common factor behind all its forms of spiritual aspiration.

The Rigveda, the oldest available of the dharmic texts from India, reflects the teachings of dozens of great sages or rishis, as part of one great spiritual family. It emphasizes a relation of friendship, kinship and equality between human beings and the devas, the spiritual forces of the universe, leading to the supreme truth. It honors all nature and asks all human beings to respect the whole of life.

The Upanishads, the cream of Vedic philosophy, consist of the inquiries, questionings and dialogues between various sages and yogis and an open discussion of their meditation based experiences. The Upanishads do not try to promote any person, belief or doctrine as final for everyone. They emphasize a greater Self-realization beyond speech and thought, name and form, but approached from a variety of angles.

- Courtesy Dr David Frawley