

# THE STORY OF THE ASSOCIATION OF DEAD PEOPLE

The Review of Case of Lal Bihari from Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh

By

Dr. Abhishek Srivastava

Assistant Professor (Law)

Alliance University

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to make an honest effort to make a case review of the one of the most discussed cases in the State of Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s "Association of Dead People vs State of Uttar Pradesh". The paper also tries to highlight the plight of number of people who have been victim of a system which blindly follows the proof of documentation. The study mainly focuses on the cases in Eastern part of the State of Uttar Pradesh. It also tells the struggle of Lal Bihari, a 22-year-old young boy from the district of Azamgarh, who was left stunned when he came to know at the government office, that he was declared dead on the government papers. It led to a start of lengthy battle for Mr. Bihari to fight for his rights and subsequently to prove that he was alive.*

*During the years of his struggle, Lal Bihari established "Mritak Sangh or Association of Dead People". The battle was long and arduous; it contained many dark passages, whenever it seemed he won't be able to get justice, Lal Bihari came up with something new. In 1980 he added word Mritak with his name to attract officials and politicians attention. He later formed Association of Dead People so as to help people who had suffered similar fate. To his surprise that there were hundreds of them who had similar story.*

*The matter however came in limelight only after the famous magazine THE TIME, exposed the whole story. The correspondent one Michael Fathers along with Meenakshi Ganguly, apparently made an on the spot enquiry and published an Article entitled "Plight of the Living Dead: Indian Farmers declared deceased by unscrupulous relatives must prove they're alive to regain their land.*

*This paper aims to cover the struggle of Lal Bihari and many others like him who had been the victim of the blatant corruption of the Government Machinery.*

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## **Chapter 1- Declared as Dead**

India, a country which has land size of 2.4% of World's Land but has 17.5% of its population. With 1.43 billion population it is the most populous country in the world. In such a scenario the crunch of the land and its demand have increased manifold. The result there

has been number of frauds regarding to land post Independence. One of which was exposed by the Time Magazine in 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populated state with the population of 25 Crore has its own history. The state is said to be crucial in terms of forming the government at the centre, no surprises as it has 80 seats in Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian Parliament.<sup>2</sup> It has played part in the freedom struggle of the country as majority of its cities were centre of Independence Struggle. However post 1991, while Rest of India have moved towards development, Uttar Pradesh just couldn't catch up with the progress. The result the state is one of the poorest regions of the country. This have resulted in extreme poverty, unemployment, slow rate of economic growth thereby giving chances to number of scams and frauds.

One such scam which took place in Eastern part of Uttar Pradesh was exposed by the Time Magazine. The magazine exposed the blatant corruption prevalent in the government offices and how a person with money can get someone else's land by declaring them dead officially in the government records.<sup>3</sup>

One such case that was brought to the public limelight was Lal Bihari's case. It was year 1976 when 22-year-Old Lal Bihari, a resident of Azamgarh went to take loan in government office. When asked about his identity proof, he submitted the government papers to show that he was Lal Bihari. To his dismay, the government officer rejected the loan on the basis that he was not alive<sup>4</sup> in the first instance he thought it was just a light joke but the next moment he understood the seriousness of the situation. He had become the victim of the greed of his relatives who wanted his property. The cause of death was learnt soon thereafter to be bureaucratic misconduct and family rivalry. Lal Bihari's uncle had approached a government official with what is believed to be Rs. 1200 (about 20 USD) with the intent of having his

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<sup>1</sup> Plight of the Living Dead, Michael Fathers, The Time Magazine, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1999, retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023

<sup>2</sup> [https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/19167\\_State\\_wise\\_seats\\_in\\_Lok\\_Sabha\\_18-03-2009.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/19167_State_wise_seats_in_Lok_Sabha_18-03-2009.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Plight of the Living Dead, Michael Fathers, The Time Magazine, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1999, retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2023

<sup>4</sup> Azamgarh Journal; Back to Life in India, Without Reincarnation, Barry Bearak, The New York Times, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2000, retrieved on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2023 at 15.02 hrs.

nephew declared deceased, the purpose of which to inherit Lal Bihari's circa 1 acre (0.4 ha) of ancestral land holdings.<sup>5</sup>

The proceeding months taught Lal Bihari that such a dualism of legal death with organic life existed in many other cases across the region of Uttar Pradesh and that he, like all other cases, had fallen victim to a common practice of localized corruption. Subsequently, Lal Bihari lost his home.

Lal Bihari was advised by legal counsel that such a case was very common in the area and that having his death revoked would take years. To build momentum for the legal proceedings he attempted to draw public attention to the case through a number of ways including changing his name to Lal Bihari Mritak - Mritak is the Hindi word for Dead. Bihari also insulted police and government officials, throwing pamphlets at them. Trying to engage them in fights and also stealing his uncle's baby to entice them into arresting him. By arresting him, police and officials would have to acknowledge that the person being arrested was living and hence papers would have to be produced for the purpose. Bihari had his wife apply for widow's pension which was denied, and he contested in Parliament for the Presidency against Rajiv Gandhi, and V.P. Singh.<sup>6</sup>

## **Chapter 2- Foundation of Association of Dead and Declared Alive in 1994**

In such despair when nothing was working for him, he founded the Association of Dead People- The purpose to form the union of such people who have been troubled by the system and were seeking justice. To the surprise of Lal Bihari, he wasn't the only victim of the scam. Infact there were hundreds and thousands like him who have been robbed of their rights and properties. They joined Lal Bihari's Association of Dead, as this started attracting the media especially the foreign media.

After a decade long struggle of 18 years (1976-1994) where he had seen some of the hardest times of his life, trying to prove him alive came the day when his perseverance paid off. On

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<sup>5</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20090604073150/http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/24/world/azamgarh-journal-back-to-life-in-india-without-reincarnation.html>

<sup>6</sup>Debroy, Bibek (2004). *India, redeeming the economic pledge*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation. pp. 133–4. ISBN 978-8171883486.

30<sup>th</sup> June 1994, he was officially declared alive in government records thereby giving him all his rights as Indian Citizen. It also helped him getting his land back which was the reason why his relatives have made him dead officially.<sup>7</sup>

Once declared alive in the summer of 1994 and after getting his land back, he was approached by his uncle who offered him apology for what he has done to him and the struggle that he has to face due to his act. Lal Bihari didn't show any anger, but he left everyone stunned by giving back the land which he has got back after years of struggle. Probably it said a lot about his character, someone who didn't gave up after being cheated from his uncle, neither jolted by corruption of government officials. At the time when the justice system was also taking time than what was expected, he continued to fight and at the end not having grudges against the ones who have wronged him.

Probably Lal Bihari's story was much larger than what was expected. He decided to help people who have been victim of greedy relatives and corrupt government clerks. The cause of Association of Dead People became his own. He was surprised to see the increase in numbers of the people who wanted to be part of the association. His home became the head office of the Association of Dead People. The member kept on increasing as the number soared up to 40,000, most of them poor, illiterate and low-caste - and began a campaign to draw attention to their plight.

Lal Bihari has been fighting for the rights of these people for almost 29 years. Many of them, he says, have not been as lucky as he was. Some have killed themselves after spending years fighting their case and eventually losing hope, while others died natural deaths before their cases were resolved.

Anil Kumar, a lawyer who has contested many cases for the Association says that only in Azamgarh there would be more than 100 cases pertaining to it. While different government have made different kinds of promises but he says when these cases are the result of a scam, justice can be elusive. "If these kinds of cases were fast-tracked so that the criminal gets punished, it would strike fear into people and prevent these kinds of crime," Kumar says.

While Bihari has been fighting for the people and still receives lot of call for help but at 68, he is losing the steam and thinking to give up the fight he took 47 years ago in 1976. "I don't

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<sup>7</sup><https://web.archive.org/web/20110319045136/http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2054133,00.html>

have the money or the energy to run the Association for the Living Dead any more," he says, "and there's no-one to take it over."

Will the government listen to the plight of these people ? Who will take up the baton of the Association after Lal Bihari ? Only time will tell.

### **Bibliography**

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