

Executions: Ancient Methods and Evolution

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Abstract: Executions, word itself drives the mind towards its question of existence in present era. A vast number of organizations and commissions try to put an end to the capital punishments from all constitutions. But a very few focus towards the methods of executions. There is no doubt that the methods for lawful killing of a criminal change from time to time with advancement of technologies. Where in past, the motive behind the creation of methods of executions was not only to end one's life but also to take his life in such a manner that to make horrible examples for the public. With evolution in methods of capital punishments, it seems that these existing methods are more humane or are they just claimed to be more humane? From so many examples of botched executions till date, it seems that technology and research towards development of appropriate method is far more behind than it should be.

Keywords: Methods of Executions, Capital Punishment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Capital punishment is a global issue which has generated controversies over the years. Views differ among societies and groups. It is the fact that mental and physical sufferings are an unavoidable consequence of the death penalty. Human rights people generally avoided deciding whether specific method of execution constitute inhumane or humane with their point of view that capital punishment itself is inhumane. From its origin and use of the word "execution" around 14th century BC to till date, methods to execute prisoners change from time to time. Historical methods which were introduced to generate fear among societies by making them gruesome are replaced by modern methods of execution which are claimed to be more humane. But is it so? The question is how far we have progressed in terms of implication of technologies into the methods of executing inmate and claiming those to be painless.

II. ANCIENT METHODS OF EXECUTIONS

The Roman law of the Twelve Tablets mentioned the death penalty in 5th BC while Draconian Code of Athens (7th BC) prescribed death as penalty for every crime committed. In the 14th Century BC, the Hittite Code also prescribed the death penalty. In Babylon, within the Code of King Hammurabi around 18th Century BC, twenty five different crimes had the death penalty.

As far as the method of execution is concerned, number of methods used to carry out execution was inhumane. In Scaphism,

an ancient Persian method of execution where a person is tied naked with hollow trunks of tree, forced fed milk and honey until he develop severe diarrhoea, exposed skin would then be covered in honey to attract insects while they were left floating in a stagnant pond. Death could take over 2 weeks. Mazzatello practised in papal states during the 18th century in which the executioner raise the mallet and stroked it down on the head of the victim, Republican Marriage practiced in France, involved the tying of a man and woman together and then both of them being thrown in a river to drown. In Sawing, practiced in parts of Europe and Asia, involved the victim being inverted and then sawn in half starting at the groin. While in Flaying, person's skin was removed from his body publically to create fear. The Blood Eagle in Nordic sagas had the death penalty involving cutting the ribs of the victim as if they resembled wings, and then pulling out of lungs through the opening made at the back.

There were methods utilising wild animals for eg. Execution by Elephant Employed in south East Asia, Bestiarii in ancient Rome where prisoners sent into the arena naked against wild animals. Some burning methods includes The Gridiron, executing the victim by broiling over a bed of hot coals and Brazen Bull, where the bull was designed to accommodate one person to fit inside, fire was lit below, the person would slowly burn to death. The head of the bull was designed to convert their screams into sound of a bull and the smoke from their burning body would be expelled through bull's nose.

Colombian Necktie in Colombia and Latin America which involved cutting open the victim's throat and then pulling the tongue out through the opening. Crucifixion of a person, a well known punishment doesn't need any explanation. One of the most brutal methods was Hanged, Drawn, and Quartered used mainly in England. In it tied victim dragged to the location of their execution (drawn) then hung until nearly dead (hanged) after that his abdomen was opened and intestines were removed and burned before his eyes. He was then also emasculated and finally beheaded followed by division of his body into four parts (quartered) and placed in various locations around England.

Ling Chi or Death by a 1000 cuts was utilized in China as punishment for over 1000 years until outlawed in 1905. It involved incising skin and making pieces of the victims body being slowly removed while the executioner tried to keep him or her alive by giving drugs for as long as possible. In 1937, Premature Burial had been used by Japanese soldiers to bury Chinese civilians alive. Guillotine, as a method of execution in the 1700's was the first method of execution came in practise under the intention of capital punishment to end life rather than inflict agony.

The garrote¹ that strangles a person to death is the method of execution used in Spain until it was outlawed in 1978. Some versions of the garrote incorporated a metal bolt which pressed in to the spinal cord, known as the Catalan garrote. The last execution by garrote was in 1977. Andorra was the last country in the world to outlaw its use in 1990.

III. WORLDWIDE CURRENT STATUS

With the development of science and technology, the methods of execution also evolved. Various global organizations including human rights commissions and socialization of the world by internet usage the trends go towards executing the criminal more human way. There are more than two-thirds of the countries in the world who have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice called abolitionist and around 58 who retain death penalty called retentionist².

Currently, there are nine common methods of execution which include: hanging, shooting by firing squad, shooting, beheading, lethal injection, stoning, gas chamber, electrocution, and falling from an unknown height. The most common method authorized by law is hanging, with sixty countries authorizing this practice. The United States is the only country

to authorize both electrocution and gas chamber and Iran is the only country to authorize pushing individuals from an unknown height. There are twenty-nine countries that authorize shooting by firing squad as a method of execution and twenty-three more that authorize shooting as a single shot to the back of head. Stoning is also common method of execution authorized by law with nine countries. There are five countries that authorize beheading and six that authorize lethal injection as a method of execution³.

India is one of them where usually hanging is the method of capital punishment but under the 1950 Army Act, hanging as well as shooting are both listed as official methods of execution in the military court-martial system⁴.

IV. SO CALLED THE “PAINLESS MODERN METHODS”

Yes, it seems inappropriate to discuss killing of human in human way but truth is also there that every year thousands of executions are carried out and thousands are awaited to be executed in a “death row” all over the world. Though china contributes major part of total number of executions carried out every year.

In 1982, the United States became the first country to perform executions by lethal injection as a means of capital punishment. Medical ethics prevents doctors from participating in executions. Member of the execution team may inject the drugs into a muscle instead of a vein. The needle may become clogged resulted in extreme pain, sometimes it is difficult to find a vein, resulting in delays of hours with the inmate remains strapped waiting for his time to exit. Even if the execution team done their job perfectly by securing IV lines and adjusting proper doses without involving medical personnel, because of subjective variations of the effect of different drugs, cases reported where executions took unusual time and prisoners went into depth of agony without losing consciousness, moreover restricted movement due to paralytic drugs prevents them to express the pain. Also autopsies carried out showed chemical burns at the injection sites in many cases. Nevada first used the gas chamber in 1924, Death can be extremely slow and painful with one case where prisoner frantically gasped and slammed his head into a steel pipe for ten minutes as the cyanide slowly took effect. Not to forget the same concept where cyanide gas (Zyklon B) was used by Nazis as a primary means of mass killing during the world war and was used to kill as many as 2,500 people at one time.

The most controversial method of the death penalty is an electrocution, an American invention. The procedure is supposed to cause immediate unconsciousness followed by death in seconds provided it is performed in a proper way. But several complications reported like third-degree burns develop at the site of contact between the electrodes and skin⁵, drooling of saliva and vomiting, blood flowing from facial orifices and intense muscle spasms. Sometimes the procedure may burn the conscious prisoners alive if performed incorrectly resulting in smell of cooking flesh and hot bright red body. In one case flame was shooting out from the headgear during an electrocution. Firing squad executions exists far back as firearms themselves, although both modern firing squad executions go smoothly, it was not unheard in the past where all five rounds penetrate the prisoner without killing him and requiring a sixth round to fire at close range to put an end to the life of him.

Hanging is one of the most ancient forms of execution. Though it is written that consciousness is lost immediately⁶ and is painless death, too short rope creates insufficient velocity to break the vertebrae and the prisoner is painfully strangled to death and too long rope creates excessive velocity and stretched out the neck. Even if the rope is of appropriate length, a prisoner with strong neck may suffer from asphyxia rather than fracture of vertebrae as evidenced in multiple executions. That is why it necessitates exceptional trained person. Stoning is one of the world's oldest forms of execution to its existence

till date. It is as old as written, and the most common death penalty described in the religious literature. The prisoner is buried either up to his waist or shoulders and then pelted with stones by a number of volunteers until battered to death. Under the terms of most constitutions, the stones must not be too big to snatch life instantly and not too small to fail its duty. The execution by stoning is extremely painful method at present. Beheading was probably the most humane form of punishment available in the ancient world and still in practice, the victim is restrained, usually forced to kneel, and the executioner decapitate by sword or knife. Guillotine is the same way to execute some sophisticated way, which dropped a heavy blade through neck causing instant decapitation. If executioner is less competent than it may be converted into the worst form of it and not to forget, cases reported where head blinks for 15 to 20 seconds after separated from own body. 'Falling from a height' last used in 2008 in Iran where Judges sometimes sentence an individual to be thrown from a cliff or other height.⁷

If we conclude the whole thing, basics behind each method of execution is to create a smooth exit of an inmate. But because of unavoidable/avoidable human errors or the error on the part of devices, executions carried out converted into botched executions many times. So necessity of invention of the new methods is to decrease the time require to end a life. Even if there is a device of excellence engineering to minimize physical harm, none of them can minimize the mental stress and fear of upcoming death. Though there are procedures that restrict the prisoners to express their pain by strapping the arms or tying the legs but all to decrease the objective feeling of pain but fail to justify subjective feeling. Okagbue stated that the impression that modern methods of execution are painless is illusory and that none of the methods of execution guarantees a painless death⁸.

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