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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Shoot to Disable: When the State Aims Below the Knee

 **THE HINDU**

9 July 2026

POLITY

GS2

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Shoot to Disable: When the State Aims Below the Knee

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THE LIFT LINE

A state that congratulates itself for shooting suspects below the knee has already conceded the argument it pretends to win, because **deterrence** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/deterrence/>) bought with extrajudicial force is not order under law, it is order in spite of it.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Uttar Pradesh’s “Operation Langda,” under which police reportedly shoot suspects in the leg to disable them during encounters, has drawn judicial concern, with the Allahabad High Court in 2026 flagging encounter statistics that far exceed national norms and reminding district police chiefs of their duty under the Supreme Court’s encounter guidelines. For the exam this is a core GS2 issue: the limits of state force, the protection of Article 21, and the accountability of the executive to the rule of law.

GS Paper 2: the protection of fundamental rights, especially Article 21; the mechanisms and institutions for accountability such as the NHRC and the judiciary; separation of powers and the rule of law.

For **Prelims**, hold the anchors: Article 21 guarantees life and personal liberty; PUCL v. State of Maharashtra (2014) laid down 16 binding guidelines for investigating police encounter deaths; D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal (1997) set out arrest and custody safeguards; the National Human Rights Commission was constituted under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993. For **Mains**, argue why due process is the substance of security, not its obstacle.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Encounter policing, in which suspects are shot dead or wounded outside the ordinary process of arrest and trial, has a long and contested history in India. “Operation Langda,” so named because officers reportedly aim below the knee to leave suspects limping, presents itself as a restrained middle path between arrest and fatal encounter. In practice it has produced a high volume of leg-shooting incidents across UP’s districts and a public messaging that treats such force as a badge of tough governance.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly insisted that every death or grievous injury in a police encounter must be independently investigated. In *PUCL v. State of Maharashtra* (2014), the Court laid down a detailed 16-point protocol, including registration of an FIR, independent probe, magisterial inquiry and prompt intimation to the NHRC. The Allahabad High Court’s 2026 intervention, warning of personal liability for officers who ignore these guidelines, is the constitutional system reasserting that even suspects retain rights the state cannot extinguish by aim.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Due process is not an obstacle to security; it is its form

The Constitution does not permit the executive to substitute its own judgment of guilt for a court’s verdict. A suspect is not a convict. When the state shoots to disable outside the procedures of arrest, it punishes before adjudication, which Article 21 forbids. Genuine internal security is built on investigation, prosecution and conviction, the slow machinery that alone distinguishes lawful force from vigilantism in uniform.

The guidelines exist precisely to prevent normalisation

The PUCL 2014 protocol and the D.K. Basu safeguards were framed because unaccountable force tends to expand. Each of the 16 PUCL directions, from independent investigation to NHRC intimation, is a friction deliberately placed against the temptation of shortcut justice. “Kneecapping” as routine policy erodes those frictions by presenting extrajudicial force as merciful and therefore acceptable.

CLAIM OF THE DETERRENCE MODEL	CONSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE
Shooting to disable is humane restraint	Any grievous force outside process still violates Article 21
Encounters deter crime	Deterrence must come from certainty of conviction, not spectacle
Speed serves victims	Speed without process risks the innocent and mocks the court
Officers act in self-defence	Genuine self-defence is proved through independent inquiry, not asserted

Accountability institutions must have teeth

The NHRC, magisterial inquiries and the courts are the designed checks, yet they work only if invoked in every case and if adverse findings carry consequence. The Allahabad High Court's warning of personal liability signals that compliance cannot be optional. Without enforced accountability, guidelines become decorative.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Frame the issue as the difference between **rule by fear** and **rule of law**. Rule by fear seeks compliance through the visible threat of state violence and treats process as delay. Rule of law seeks compliance through the certainty and fairness of adjudication and treats process as legitimacy. A policing model that markets injury as mercy is choosing the first while claiming the second. The transferable rule: whenever the state asks to be trusted with force free of process, ask who verifies the necessity, because unverified force is indistinguishable from abuse.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Deterrence rhetoric -> "shoot to disable" as policy (Operation Langda) -> suspects wounded outside arrest process -> collides with Article 21 + PUCL 2014 guidelines + D.K. Basu safeguards -> accountability via FIR, independent probe, magisterial inquiry, NHRC -> High Court warns of personal liability -> reassert rule of law over rule by fear

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Enforce the PUCL protocol without exception.** Ensure every encounter, fatal or disabling, triggers an FIR, an independent investigation and a magisterial inquiry, with mandatory NHRC intimation.
- ② **End the spectacle.** Stop official messaging that celebrates injuring suspects, since publicity converts extrajudicial force into a governance brand.
- ③ **Strengthen conviction, not encounters.** Invest in investigation, forensics and prosecution so that deterrence flows from the certainty of lawful punishment.
- ④ **Attach real consequence to violations.** Act on the courts' warning of personal liability so that officers who bypass the guidelines face professional and legal accountability.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested custodial and encounter violence, the role of the NHRC, and the balance between security and civil liberties. This editorial links those themes to Article 21 and to the Supreme Court's binding encounter jurisprudence (<https://ujjayari.com/terms/jurisprudence/>).

Practice question: “Extrajudicial force, even when it stops short of killing, is incompatible with the rule of law.” Examine in the light of Article 21 and the Supreme Court’s guidelines on police encounters. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion>)

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