

Indian-held Kashmir continues to simmer over deaths of two women last May

By Kranti Kumara
7 January 2010

To the dismay and anger of many Kashmiris, India's premier crime investigation agency has ruled that two young women whose deaths had been attributed to the thuggery of security forces died accidentally.

India's premier crime investigation agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), recently released a report that declared that the two young women whose bodies were discovered in a shallow stream last May 30 in Shopian District in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) died of accidental drowning.

The CBI's claims—which contradict the findings of earlier forensic medical reports and a one-man state government commission of inquiry—have stoked the long simmering resentments of ordinary Kashmiris against the Indian government and the hundreds of thousands of armed security forces it has deployed in the country's northernmost state to crush a nationalist-separatist insurgency that is supported by India's arch-rival, Pakistan.

Previous forensic analysis conducted by local doctors had concluded that the 22-year-old Neelofar Jan, and her 17-year-old sister-in-law, Asiya Jan, had been raped and murdered most probably by Indian security forces. Over the past two decades, thousands of people, both insurgents and civilians, have been murdered, "disappeared," tortured, and/or raped by Indian security forces.

The CBI undertook a two month investigation at the direction of the J&K High Court and submitted their 66 page final report on Dec. 14, after its contents had been leaked to the press.

The CBI report resurrects the original claims of local police and Shopian district authorities that the women's deaths were accidental; exonerates the four police officers, including the district police

superintendent, who were arrested on charges of destroying evidence; and accuses thirteen persons—two relatives of the victims, six doctors who conducted the original postmortem analysis, and five attorneys—with conspiring to cook up the evidence of rape and murder and attempting to "malign" Indian security forces.

Four days earlier, the CBI had filed criminal charges in the Chief Judicial Magistrate Court in Srinagar against the thirteen, indicting them "for misleading the investigations and fabricating evidence about rape and murder."

The CBI's final report has been met with derision and contempt by ordinary Kashmiris, who over the past two decades have endured the wanton criminality of the 600,000 Indian military and paramilitary troops who occupy the state and the collusion of the police and other authorities in covering up their misdeeds.

Members of the young women's family burnt a copy of the report in front of the state High Court. In the days immediately following its release, thousands of people came out on the streets of towns across J&K to condemn the CBI report and did so despite concerted police attempts to suppress the protests. At least twelve people, including two policemen, were injured in clashes.

Such repression is the standard modus operandi of India's ruling elite in J&K, India's only majority-Muslim state. The authorities routinely impose curfews, ban protests and even political meetings, and round up government opponents before planned demonstrations in so-called "preventative arrests."

The deaths of the two women became a major political issue in J&K last June after the Shopian police and district authorities refused to treat the women's deaths as a criminal matter. The town of Shopian,

which lies about 50 kilometers from Srinagar, J&K's largest city, was in an uproar for weeks and protests soon spread across the Kashmir Valley.

On May 29, 2009 Neelofar and Asiya Jan failed to return before dark from a visit to the family orchard. The family was immediately worried and anxious, since disappearances and killings at the hands of Indian security forces have become a common occurrence.

Shakeel, the husband of Neelofar, led a search party along the route from his home to the orchard. As the evening wore on, the family sought the aid of local police.

Several camps of Indian security forces including those of the army, the Central Reserve Police and district police straddle prominently along the path to the orchard. The search party paid special attention to a shallow stream named Rambhara Nallah where the bodies of the young victims were later discovered. The search was abandoned at around 2:30 AM on May 30 with the police promising to resume the search early the next morning.

However Shakeel returned around 5:30 AM to resume the search and about an hour later he was joined by local police. One of the police, Shafeeq Ahmad, discovered the body of Neelofar Jan just upstream from a bridge over the Rambhara stream in shallow waters having a depth of no more than 2 to 2.5 feet. Yet this same spot had been thoroughly searched just four hours earlier by both the family and the police accompanying them.

The body of Neelofar's 17-year-old sister-in-law and Shakeel's sister was subsequently discovered about a kilometer and a half from the spot where Neelofar's was found. Asiya was found to have sustained a severe frontal head injury.

Subsequent forensic analysis by doctors came to the conclusion that the women were subjected to rape and then killed. They also found that the women could not have died from drowning.

Two eyewitnesses also came forward to reveal that they had seen two screaming young women in a security truck on the bridge near where the body of Neelofar was discovered. These eyewitnesses further stated that they were shouted at and ordered to leave the area immediately by those in the truck.

Despite this, it took massive and sustained protests to compel the authorities and government to take an

interest in the women's deaths.

In an attempt to defuse the situation, the state government, a coalition between the J&K National Conference and the Congress Party, appointed a commission of inquiry to look into the matter. It found that police had destroyed crucial evidence and on its recommendation four officers were arrested and charged.

With its report the CBI has brazenly set all this aside.

The Independent Women's Organization for Justice (IWOJ), a Delhi-based organization which last August undertook a fact-finding trip to Shopian, has prepared a painstaking reply to the CBI report. It demonstrates that the CBI's findings are the continuation of the state cover-up that began as soon as the women's bodies were recovered. It also demonstrates that the authorities have systematically sought to discredit and victimize anyone who sought to challenge police claims the two women drowned. "Quite clearly the signal being sent out by the CBI to the people of Shopian," declares an IWOJ press release, "is that anyone who will dare to seek or speak the truth will be penalised."

The full report can be read here.

In March 2008 around 1000 unmarked graves were discovered by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), an organization that had been founded in response to the alarming number of persons who have disappeared at the hands of Indian security forces. (See "Nearly 1000 unmarked graves discovered in Indian-occupied Kashmir")

Two years later, the government has effectively buried any investigation into the mass grave, just as it has numerous other atrocities.

The leaders of "democratic" India have given and continue to give their security forces *carte blanche* in Kashmir, sanctioning bloody political repression and conniving in the security forces' more mundane corruption and criminality.

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