

India: Gujarat police murders covered up as terrorist “encounters”

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The stunning admission of the government of the West Indian state of Gujarat that the state police summarily executed a Muslim man in a phony terrorist encounter, and later murdered his wife so as to cover up their actions, is threatening to expose the routine use of such criminal practices. These methods, which are commonly associated with military and fascist dictatorships, are in widespread use by police and security forces across India.

In March the Gujarat government admitted that Sohrabuddin Sheikh was not, as the police and state government had previously insisted, a terrorist killed by police in a street battle. Rather he had been the victim of a police murder. Then on April 30 the Gujarat government conceded in India's Supreme Court that Sohrabuddin Sheikh's wife, Kauserbi, had been executed on November 28, 2005, just days after her husband and that the police had burned Kauserbi's body in an attempt to hide their crime.

The admission that Kauserbi had also been murdered came in response to a writ of habeas corpus filed by her brother-in-law with the aim of forcing the authorities to reveal her whereabouts.

Three senior police officers—DG. Vanjara, deputy inspector general of the Gujarat's police's border range unit; Rajkumar Pandyan, a superintendent of the Gujarat Intelligence Bureau; and Dinesh Kumar, superintendent of police in Alwar, in the neighboring state of Rajasthan—were arrested on April 25, 2007, five days before the Gujarat state government tabled its “action-taken report” in the Supreme Court.

The exposure of the police killings in Gujarat has added to a mounting outcry over the repressive actions and lawlessness of security forces, especially in Jammu and Kashmir and the northeast, where there are various separatist insurgencies. Earlier this year, the state government in Jammu and Kashmir was forced to call a public inquiry into civilian disappearances and phony police-terrorist encounters after the discovery that several of those whom the police had passed off as terrorist killers were innocent civilians.

The police murders of Sohrabuddin Sheikh and Kauserbi have also become a crisis for Gujarat's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government, especially as there is evidence that the government was complicit in police attempts to cover up the murders, if not the murders themselves.

It is not incidental nor accidental that Sohrabuddin Sheikh and Kauserbi were Muslims. Working hand in glove with security forces, Gujarat's Hindu supremacist BJP government has abused and terrorized the Muslim minority. In 2002, the BJP regime fomented an anti-Muslim pogrom which resulted in the deaths of more than 2,000 Muslims and left tens of thousands of others homeless and jobless. (See “India's ruling party abetted communal carnage in Gujarat”)

Sohrabuddin Sheikh and Kauserbi (whose name has also been given by the Indian press as Kauser Bibi, Kauser Banu, and Kausarbi) were abducted by a team of Gujarat police, reputedly with help from the Andhra Pradesh state police, while the couple were traveling by bus from Andhra Pradesh's state capital, Hyderabad, to Sangli in the state of Maharashtra on the night of November 22, 2005.

A team of armed men, not dressed in police uniform, intercepted the bus, using a van to force it to stop on a desolate section of highway around 1:30 a.m. on November 23. Significantly, neither the Gujarat nor Andhra Pradesh police had any right to intercept the bus, since when they stopped it, it was in the in the neighboring state of Karnataka.

An armed contingent then forced their way onto the bus and seized the couple and a third person who was seated next to them. This third person is believed to have been an associate of Sohrabuddin named Tulsiram Prajapati, who is alleged to have been a police informer.

The three were subsequently taken to a farmhouse in a village outside Ahmadabad, Gujarat's principal city. Three days later, on November 26, 2005, the police arranged for a “fake encounter” (the word encounter is used in general parlance in India to mean the police interception of insurgents and terrorists), murdering Sohrabuddin and then announcing to the media that they had killed a militant of the Lashkar-e-taiba (LT, “Army of the Righteous”).

An Islamist group active in the anti-Indian insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, the LT has been responsible for various communal, terrorist atrocities. It is presented by the Indian government and media as the most ruthless terrorist organization active in India and is frequently publicly named as having been the author of terrorist actions with little or no proof offered to support the charges.

In the case of Sohrabuddin, the police claimed that he was involved in a plot to kill Gujarat's chief minister, Narendra Modi. A senior leader of the BJP, Modi gained national notoriety for the role he played in inciting the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom.

Two days later, but without the public fanfare, the police murdered Kauserbi, apparently because she knew too much about the foul affair.

In December 2005, Sohrabuddin's brother, Rubabuddin, wrote a letter to the Indian Supreme Court asking for an inquiry into the killing of his brother. On January 21, 2006, the court directed Gujarat Director General of Police (DGP) P.C. Pande to start an enquiry into the circumstances surrounding Sohrabuddin's “encounter killing.”

For five months Pande took no action. Only in June did he instruct Ms. Geetha Johri, of the Indian government's criminal investigation agency, the Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI), to look into the matter.

Johri and the investigating team she assembled soon came across

evidence that suggested police foul play and filed several interim reports to that effect. As the investigation proceeded, Johri decided to interview Tulsiram Prajapat, reputed to be the third passenger picked up by police when they seized the murdered couple from the bus on November 23, 2005. On the day in December 2006 that she was to interview Tulsiram, the Gujarat police announced that he had been killed in yet another “encounter.”

Johri, meanwhile, came under increasing pressure, including reportedly from both the recently arrested DIG, Vanjara, and from Gujarat’s home Minister Amit Shah, to back off. Subsequently, she was removed from the investigation and ordered to hand over all her files for “scrutiny.”

Amit Shah’s brazen interference with the CID investigation points to the possible involvement of high-level BJP officials in this affair. Vanjara is said to be a favorite of Chief Minister Modi.

As head of Gujarat’s Anti-Terrorist Squad, Vanjara gained notoriety as an “encounter specialist,” gunning down Muslims whom police asserted, like the unfortunate Sohrabuddin Sheikh, were terrorists.

Vanjara has apparently sought to bully and terrorize anyone who has questioned his methods. This can be gleaned from the fact that around 150 advocates (attorneys) of the Ahmadabad Metropolitan Court wrote to the Bar Association vice-president to go on record that none of them would defend Vanjara, for he has “troubled advocates in the past.”

Tahelka.com, a news web site that gained prominence thanks to its video-tape exposure of high-level corruption in the Defence Ministry under India’s previous BJP coalition government, has claimed that the murder of Sohrabuddin Sheikh was a contract killing. *Tahelka.com* alleges that an influential marble trader in Rajasthan paid Gujarat police Rs. 6,000,000 (around \$140,000) to kill Sohrabuddin, who had been extorting money from him and other marble traders. The funds are said to have been passed on to the police, who carried out the killing by a relative of the marble trader and a senior BJP politician whose name has not been revealed.

Both India’s police and political establishment are notoriously corrupt. Only last month a BJP Lok Sabha MP from Gujarat was arrested for using diplomatic passports to try to smuggle people into Canada for money.

But even if Sohrabuddin Sheikh’s killing was a Mafia-style hit, from which one or more BJP politicians financially benefited, the BJP government’s attempts to cover up his murder is likely motivated by more than fear of the exposure of corruption in the police and government. The police and BJP have been partners in the victimization of the state’s Muslim minority.

On May 5, India’s Supreme Court made the observation that there is a prima facie case for a CBI inquiry into the killings. The court also ordered the Gujarat government to submit a final report within two weeks, asked it to explain the reason why IGP Geeta Johri had been “taken off the investigation,” and said it would issue a final ruling on May 15 as to whether there should be a CBI inquiry.

Within hours of the Supreme Court’s ruling, the Gujarat government reinstated Geeta Johri as head of the investigation into the murders.

The Gujarat unit of the Congress Party has demanded the CBI investigate the roles of Narendra Modi and the Home Minister Amit Shah in the murders of Sohrabuddin Sheikh and Kauserbi. “No encounter can take place without the consent of the chief minister and Home Minister. We want an independent CBI inquiry into this,”

thundered Arjun Modhvadia, opposition leader in the Gujarat Assembly.

With state elections due this fall, the Congress is hoping to score some political points off this scandal. But both the Congress in Gujarat and India’s Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government have a long record of conniving with and capitulating to the BJP regime in Gujarat. While the UPA, in pursuit of political gain, has been quite ready to invoke “president’s rule” in other states, it has not called for a serious investigation of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, let alone moved to dismiss the Gujarat government for its role in this monstrous crime.

Phony “encounter killings” are not a new development in India. Human rights groups have long charged that police and security forces in India carry out summary executions. Over the past three decades, thousands of people across India, but especially in Kashmir and the Northeast have been murdered under the guise of such encounters.

The entire Indian political establishment and judiciary have been complicit in this practice. As for the corporate media, it has invariably trumpeted police claims of having felled terrorists and insurgents in the heat of battle and thereby saved Indian lives.

However in the wake of the exposures of the phony police encounters in Kashmir and Gujarat, sections of the press are taking a different line and have begun, even if timidly, to raise questions. The *Hindustan Times* has begun a series of articles on the practice of extra-judicial killings in India and some media voices have called for a “truth commission” along the lines of those set up in Argentina and Chile following the collapse of the dictatorships that ruled those countries in the 1970s and 1980s.

Clearly sections of the elite are concerned that the corruption and lawlessness of the police and security forces and the communal violence of the Hindu right are discrediting the Indian state along with claims of the elites that—the appalling poverty of the country’s toilers notwithstanding—India is the world’s most populous democracy.



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