

Politicizing Shopian dual murder case

Islamists gaining ground

If the objective of Hurriyat and PDP was to know the truth about the real culprits who committed this heinous crime, what fun was there to divert people's anger to the movement of Azadi and even link it with the absurd demand for the withdrawal of Indian security forces from strife-torn J&K state and scrapping of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

By G L Jalali

Situated forty five kilometers away from Srinagar, Shopian is known as the apple town of south Kashmir. It has always been the hub of political activities. One cannot deny the fact that prior to the outbreak of Muslim insurgency the town was the strong hold of National Conference. The people of this beautiful town always elected National Conference candidate to the state assembly. Late Abdul Majid Bandey, a local National Conference leader, was elected to the state Assembly a number of times. During Quit Kashmir movement, which was launched by National Conference in mid forties, well-known Kashmiri Pandit leader, late Saroop Nath played an important part which was lauded even by Sheikh Abdullah. Scores of National Conference workers courted arrest to sustain the movement. Jamat-e-Islami leader, late Maulvi Mohammad Amin, a government teacher and a close relative of Saif-ud-Qari, the then Jamat supremo, founded a branch of the party in this apple town of Kashmir. The town has always remained the centre of cultural activities. It produced Kashmir's well known poets and literary figures including late Shamim Ahmad Shamim, Mohammad Yousuf Teng, Mohammad Ayub Betab, Gulzar Kashmiri etc. Shopian town has historical significance. Mughal emperor sent his army to conquer Kashmir. The forces of Kashmiri ruler Yousuf chak were defeated by the Mughal army at Shopian It was an important halting station of Mughal halting station of Mughal emperors who travelled to Kashmir enroute Mughal road that linked Kashmir to the rest of India during medieval times. Shopian town is known for landscape beauty as it is surrounded on all sides by snow-topped mountains. The Aharbal waterfalls is just ten kilometers away from the town. It attracts thousands of tourists every year. A good number of Kashmiri Pandits used to live in the town prior to the mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits from the valley in 1989. Fear stricken Pandits were forced to leave the town after scores of Pandits were killed brutally in the town by militants. On the outskirts of the town there stands a famous Hindu shrine which was visited annually by hundreds of Kashmiri Pandits just to pay homage to their dead kins and perform Shrada ceremony. We have learnt from an authentic source that militants have completely annihilated the shrine and the land attached to the temple occupied by the locals in connivance with the revenue authorities despite the protest from Kashmiri Pandit migrants. Their protest has fallen on deaf ears. Shopian town was once known for social harmony and cordial relations between Muslims and Pandits. But of late this apple town of South Kashmir has hogged the head lines of newspapers for a different reason. It has turned into a stronghold of Islamists and pro-Pakistan political outfits which rouse the religious sentiments of Muslims on petty concocted and fabricated issues just to take political

mileage and to achieve their secessionist agenda. Murder and alleged rape of two innocent ladies would shock any right thinking person anywhere. The murder and rape of two women in Shopian has come as a rude shock to the people living both inside and outside the state. This rude shock cannot be expressed in words. But the way in which the whole episode is being exploited by the vested elements just to take political mileage is, indeed, more shocking. Local police in Shopian recovered the bodies of 24-year old pregnant lady Nilofer and her 17-year old sister-in-law Asifa Jan near a mountainous, rapid flowing stream Rambasa in Shopian on May 30, 2009. Asifa Jan was student of a local school while Nilofar Jan was a house wife. It is reported that both Asifa Jan and Nilofer had gone to visit their nearby orchard. Both of them did not return to their home. Their home people felt paranoid and made a thorough search to trace the young ladies. An army camp was near the place where the two dead bodies were recovered by the police. Some mischievous elements rumored that the two ladies were killed and raped by the army men. As the army is visible all over the valley for purpose of combating and eliminating Pak-sponsored terrorism, it is not difficult for political parties with close links with militant outfits and infamous ISI-the main trouble shooter-to divert people's attention from their day-to-day problems to the mysterious dual murder case and impute motives to the Indian security forces which is a thorn in their eyes. Local Jamat-e-Islami elements took the full advantage and started agitation, demanding the immediate arrest of culprits. Their main target was the army. They also demanded the withdrawal of the Army from the entire valley (state) and the immediate repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). Both these demands are on the agenda of the secessionist parties including the two factions of the Hurriyat and Mufti Sayed's so-called secular party PDP. The agitators, who seemingly protested the murder and rape of Shopian ladies, raised their pet slogan "We want Azadi". One could easily conclude that Islamists were actively involved in the agitation. Initially the agitation and protest marches were confined to Shopian town, but within days it spread like wild fire all over the valley, particularly in Pulwama and Srinagar districts. Local authorities failed to contain the agitation and made serious blunders. In the first instance local police came out with a statement that the two ladies were drowned and their death was caused by drowning.

The doctors working in Shopian district Hospital issued a separate statement, stating that they were unable to complete the autopsy of the dead bodies of two women because of the mob violence. Later doctors of Pulwama District Hospital and the Srinagar Forensic Laboratory stated that they could not find any injury mark on the dead bodies. J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, while addressing newsmen in Srinagar, said that the death of two Shopian ladies was due to drowning. His statement added fuel to the public anger. It was on June 7 (after one week of the murder) that the police admitted that the interim medical report submitted by the doctors who conducted autopsy of the dead bodies indicated the "prima facie cognizable offence had taken place and a case of murder and rape had been registered". It was also stated in the report that the forensic experts found sperm stains in private parts of the murdered women. Thus, at the first instance the blame of misleading the public rests on the local administration which took a non-serious view of situation that has snowballed into a big political crisis for the state government headed by Omar Abdullah. The ham handling of a local issue deepened the mystery of the murder case. Mr. Ali Mohammad Sagar, who holds the rank of a cabinet minister, rushed to Shopian and stated that the government would bring out the truth behind the murder within forty eight hours. Nothing of that sort came out even after two months. Meanwhile mischievous elements exploited the situation and roused people's anger to such an extent that the situation, by and large, is becoming out of control. Thousands of people are participating in protest marches. They attack military installations and government offices. Through these protest marches, general masses express their lack of confidence in the government. Even so-called secular party like PDP has joined the fray. Its president Mehbooba Mufti goes from district to district, rousing people's anger through her anti-India speeches. To salvage the situation and bringing normalcy in the valley Omar Abdullah has admitted his mistake of relying on false reports by the administration. He has suspended a number of officers and formed an enquiry Commission headed by a retired High Court judge, justice Jan and asked to submit a report within one month. In this mysterious Shopian murder case and the subsequent agitation, separatist parties are

playing disastrous role. It was expected of them, keeping in view their track record of subversive and pro-Pakistan activities since 1989. It was a golden opportunity for them to fish in the troubled waters of the Jhelum. The announcement of the Commission of enquiry did not go down the throat of the secessionist leaders who are known for playing "cat and mouse game", striving to achieve their secessionist agenda. Sayed Ali Shah Geelani, the head of the Hurriyat splinter group Tehrik Hurriyat, took lead in the protest marches, making it a religious issue and blaming Hindu soldiers raping and murdering Kashmiri Muslim women. He called the judicial commission sham to gain time. The Kashmir Bar Association which is in cahoot with the secessionist leadership wanted a sitting judge to conduct probe into the case. Behind this blame game, their is Association's sinister agenda of Azadi. Maulana Umar Farooq, the chairman of "ASLI" Hurriyat, could not remain silent. In his Friday sermons at Jamia Masjid, Nowhatta, 34 year old Mirwaiz breathed fire against India. He alleged the murder of Shopian ladies was an Indian conspiracy to weaken their Azadi movement. State government was forced to place Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Sayed Ali Shah Geelani, JLKF supremo Yassin Malik, Shabir Shah and their cronies under house arrest. But their arrest had no effect as protest marches continued in all the major towns of the Muslim dominated valley. At some places these protest marches took violent turn. In Baramulla town four protesters were killed in police firing. Though Sayed Ali Shah Geelani formally announced the termination of the first phase of agitation and protest marches from June 10, he called upon the student community to stage protest marches for two days. Apart from this, he urged upon government employees, the teaching and non-teaching staff of Kashmir University (99per cent are Muslims) to stage demonstrations to protest against the alleged rape and murder of two Muslim women in Shopian town. It was for the first time since 1989 that women employees of the civil secretariat in Srinagar staged protest march on June 13 at the behest of the Hurriyat leaders. By and large these protest marches are continuing and the pot remains boiling in the valley. After the Amarnath land row agitation which was a complete failure, Hurriyat leadership was exposed in the public eyes. Despite the Hurriyat's boycott call, bulk of Kashmiri Muslims voters zealously participated in the elections to state. Assembly Entire Hurriyat leadership was frustrated. The dual murder of Shopian women came as a God sent opportunity to them. The entire Hurriyat leadership is exploiting the Shopian issue to the hilt. Possibly they are doing it under the instructions from Pakistan's ISI. The Azadi movement has been once again revived because of the ham handling the Shopian dual murder case by the state government. Lately there has been another development in the case. The Jammu and Kashmir High Court has directed the Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed by the state government to exhume the dead bodies of the two murdered women for a fresh autopsy and collecting DNA samples. The verdict came on a public interest litigation filed by the Kashmir Bar Association. The Honorable Court found the report submitted earlier by the SIT inconclusive and faulty, for "the DNA test report was missing and the post mortuam seemed not to have been done properly". It also said that the exhumation of the dead bodies of Shopian women was conditional upon the consent of the families of the murdered women. The Bench directed the investigation team to administer narco-analysis test to the suspended police officers. Whereas J&K Chief Minister Omer Abdullah welcomed the High Court order and expressed confidence that it would help establish facts, PDP president Mehbooba Mufti and Hurriyat leaders said that it would

prolong the enquiry and as such the order was in the interest of the state government. Smarting under the recent electoral defeat, PDP wants to harass the government led by Omer Abdullah. That is why Mehbooba Mufti and her father are fomenting the ongoing agitation over the mysterious murder of Shopian women. Hurriyat leaders are politicising the issue and provoking people (Muslims) to take up cudgels with the government. Just after the court verdict thousands of residents of Shopian town and adjoining villages staged a protest march, demanding severe punishment to the culprits. Even in down town Srinagar, Sopore and Baramulla protesters came to street and clashed with the police. Curfew was imposed in Sopore and Baramulla where rioters indulged in violence. Many lives were lost in the police firing. If the objective of the Hurriyat and PDP was to know the truth about the real culprits who committed this heinous crime, what fun was there to divert people's anger to the movement of Azadi and even link it with the (absurd) demand for the withdrawal of the Indian security from the strife-town J&K state and the scrapping of Armed Forces special Powers Act (AFSPA). Earlier militants committed so many heinous crimes such gruesome murder of persons, including political leaders and raping and kidnaping of women. At that time Hurriyat leaders remained silent. "Violent death has visited the Shopian area often, for the most part without drawing comment. In April 60year old Reshma Awana was executed by the Lashker-e-Taiba at Phalipora. Her son, Mohammad Aslam, was shot and seriously wounded while protecting his mother. Last month, Dachnoo resident Mohammad Saifuddin was killed similarly and a day after Nigeena Awana was murdered, unidentified men shot dead shopkeeper Mohammad Abdullah Gela at his Sanger- wani home. What, then, is it that has vested the Shopian with special significance?" (Praveen Swami, the Hindu, June 17, 2009). It is in the interest of Kashmiris that the Shopian dual murder case is not politicised at the behest of vested interests. Last year Kashmiris decisively rejected Hurriyat's communal chauvinism and defeated its demand for a boycott of Assembly elections. It is hoped that people give up violence and create favorable conditions for the enquiry Commission to do its work. Let them wait for the findings of the Commission.!