

# Kashmiris rankled by brothel revelations

An investigation raises issue of whether the state sponsored the brothel in bid to ensnare militants.

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With shady intelligence agents, betrayed militants, corrupt officials, underage girls, and a gritty brothel, the case has all the makings of a John le Carré novel, set in the gorgeous Himalayan valley of Kashmir.

But the two-year criminal investigation of a Srinagar brothel – allegedly protected and patronized by top Indian and state officials – could do more than titillate; it could undermine what faith many Kashmiris have left in the Indian government.

"This discredits the state more and more. Whatever credibility was left ... it is now gone," says Sheikh Showkat Hussein, a law professor at the University of Kashmir. "When the deputy inspector general of [Border Security Forces], K.S. Padhi, was arrested, he said, 'This was part of our counterinsurgency operation. We were doing our job. We used to enlist girls for spying purposes.' It means it was part of state policy."

At the heart of the issue here is whether the brothel, run by a mysterious Kashmiri woman named Sabina, was merely a side business in a long-troubled conflict zone, or a tool to ensnare Kashmiri militants. Either possibility is damaging, given the number of high officials already arrested, but the latter possibility has explosive political implications for a Muslim majority state where insurgents have battled Indian forces for self-determination for 17 years.

"This is not an individual act, this is a state-sponsored activity, and it runs very deep," says Mian Abdul Qayum, a pro-separatist lawyer and president of the state Bar Association in Srinagar. In May 2006, Mr. Qayum filed a public-interest litigation case calling for an independent investigation of state involvement. "Let's assume this was in the national interests, for some counterinsurgency purposes. Is it right to do this? Isn't it a shame for ... the world's largest democracy, a secular government, to use minor girls as spies, and then turn them into prostitutes?"

With the case now taken behind closed doors by India's Central Bureau of Investigation, to prevent – or facilitate, say separatist leaders – tampering, the reported facts reveal an unseemly use of official position in the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir state.

As far back as October 2004, Srinagar residents in the Chinkra Mohalla neighborhood started complaining to police about a brothel run by a married woman named Sabina. In 2005, she reappeared in Habba Kadal, a working-class area of 80-year-old brick-and-wood homes along the Jhelum River. Residents there say they noticed a steady flow of young women and older men to the home. But they say they were afraid to complain.

"Every morning at 9 a.m., a Santro car came down the lane to this house," says a young man, a neighbor, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "One fat man was the driver, and he would have two girls, ages 20 to 21, with him. They would make a call to Sabina and ask if it was safe for them to come in. Police officers used to come, but not in uniform, and bureaucrats and politicians, too."

"The whole community was aware of what was going on," says the young man. "She caused so much trouble, we didn't want to talk about her."

Then, in late April 2006, police discovered a group of men reproducing pornographic CDs. When a girl in the video was found, she revealed that she had been forced by Sabina into prostitution, along with 70 other young girls and women. The girl, a 14-year-old known as Yasmina, also alleged that many of her customers were top bureaucrats, politicians, and security officials.

The list of those she named – now under arrest without bail – is a who's who of the Kashmiri state. They include a senior Congress Party state leader, an independent legislator from Srinagar, the principal secretary to the former state chief minister, the deputy superintendent of Jammu and Kashmir police, and the deputy inspector general of the border security force.

According to the Kashmir Times, K.S. Padhi admitted to CBI investigators that he was using girls for "operational purposes," and had to depend on "prostitutes" to lure militants. Separately, M.K. Dhar, former Intelligence Bureau joint director, confirmed that India used prostitutes in the early 1990s for intelligence-gathering. "I deftly used the services of a Delhi-based Muslim lady to recruit a couple of Kashmiri Muslim assets. Initially 50 girls were trained. They did a wonderful job and helped eliminate and arrest several militants."

The release of these names has taken Srinagar by storm, and in May activists from separatist groups took to the streets to demand justice.

"This is a war crime," says Asiya Andrabi, leader of a separatist women's group called Dukhtaran-i Millat (Daughters of the Islamic Nation). The group led a protest that culminated in attacks on Sabina's home on May 5, 2006. "As far as chastity of our women is concerned, this is the most heinous crime India can do. If a common man was involved, that would be depraved. But this is policy."

"People were very furious," says Farooq Ahmad, deputy inspector general for Jammu and Kashmir Police in Srinagar. "This is serious. The girl is only 14 or 15 years old. That is statutory rape. But so far it is only an individual network by people who contracted to satisfy their lust."

But Peerzada Mohammad Sayeed, president of the state Congress Party in Srinagar, says that the scandal has already caused enough stir. "This is not that serious a matter; it is a routine in Delhi or Mumbai (Bombay)," he says from his fortified office in Srinagar. "It's a bailable offense. CBI is investigating. This has been politicized to malign the image of some [mainstream] politicians."