

Fact-finding report of death of two tribal girls in Simdega

From 17 August to 22 August, 2019, a team of social activists, lawyers and womens' rights organizations gathered to investigate the facts of the death of two girls, Shradhha Soreng and Sunandini Bage in Simdega, Jharkhand. For the same, the team visited Arani, Biru, Bhrikumunda Patratoli, Bansjor area in Jharkhand and also Lachhada, Gurundiya, Hamirpur (Rourkela) areas in Orissa. In the process, the team interacted with the villagers around the spot of incident, families of the dead girls, their hockey coach and the police.

The team included the following individuals – Taramani Sahu (Human Rights Activist), Arif Raza (NHRO), Dharmendra (NHRO), Anoop, Scholastica, Nirmala Xalxo (Adivasi Womens' Network), Regina (Adivasi Womens' Network), Pallavi Pratibha (Social Activist), and Vivek Kumar (Right to Food Campaign, Jharkhand).

Summary:

On Sunday, 11 August, 2019, two girls were found dead, hanging from a tree in Arani, Simdega, Jharkhand. These girls were Shradhha Shalini Soreng (14 years), resident of Bhrikumunda, Patratoli, PS – Bansjor, Simdega and Sunandini Bage (23 years), resident of Lacchada, Sundargarh, Orissa. The two girls are hockey players. According to police investigation and post-mortem report, the two girls committed suicide, however, as per their families and villagers living around the incident location, it appears as murder.

Police investigation and result:

As per police investigation, at the time when the dead bodies of Sunandini Bage (23) and Shradhha Soreng (14) were found, their faces were covered with a piece of cloth. A working mobile phone was found in Sunandini's pocket. Around 11 pm, an SMS had been sent to Coach Mary Purty's daughter Sonam Purty. Nearby, a bag was found with contents as scissor, knife, blade and a rope. The post-mortem report states that the cause of death for the two girls is hanging. In the form of evidence, police has collected Shradhha's diary, leaves of dates (khajur) with writings on them and a soap that has 'Sunandini' is written; and using the above, is trying to establish that Shradhha and Sunandini were in a romantic relationship. Prime witness for the same is Pushpa Lohar (14) who lived with Sunandini Bage at Coach Mary Purty's house, and also knew Shradhha Soreng. The three of them had met during training under Mary Purty for Chhotanagpur Tribal Women Hockey Tournament 2019 organized by Hockey Association of Chhotanagpur Tribals. Pushpa Lohar testified to the existence of homosexual relationship between Sunandini Bage and Shradhha Soreng and that the two found it difficult to stay without each other. Based on the evidences and statement by the witness, police is considering homosexuality to be the reason behind their suicides.

Shradhha's family:

In Shradhha's family, there are her father Rajesh Soreng, mother Vimla Soreng and two brothers Aseem Soreng (18) and Avip Soreng (12), with Shradhha being the only daughter. According to Rajesh Soreng, Shradhha practiced for hockey while staying with Coach Mary Purty. She got connected to Mary Purty through Michael Minz in December 2018. At that

time, she was a student of class 8th in St. Mary's School. Mary Purty was supposed to help enrol Shradhha in a school in Orissa for her further education in class 9th alongside her training in hockey. In January 2019, Shradhha Soreng and Sunandini Bage participated in Chhotanagpur Tribal Women Hockey Tournament 2019 in Delhi. However, as the admission got delayed, she returned to Simdega. She rejoined her school (St Mary) in June 2019 in Class 9th.

Information about the incident received from Shradhha's family members and the villagers from Bhukumunda, Patratoli:

Rajesh Soreng informed the team that on 10 August, Saturday Shradhha left for school around 6 am, but did not return. On the same day, around 8 am, Shradhha's mother received a call from Sonam Purty asking whether "Shradhha had left for school or not?", post that around 7.30 pm, another call from Sonam informed Shradhha's family that Shradhha was with Sunandini. To both the families, the first person to provide the information about the incident was Sonam Purty. Next morning on 11.08.2019, Sunday, around 7 am Sonam Purty called Shradhha's mother and expressed that Shradhha and Sunandini are about to commit suicide. Worried by the call, Shradhha's mother rings on Sunandini's mobile, which is picked by Bansjor Police who informs that the two girls have been found hanging, and asked them to come to the police station. Around 9 am, Rajesh Soreng reached Bansjor police station.

The bodies weren't shown to the families initially, it was only after the post – mortem, that the bodies got handed over to the families. Further, Shradhha's father informs the team that even before the post-mortem report came out, police had started saying that it was suicide. On 13 August, police came to Shradhha's house and without any enquiry, collected some of Shradhha's notebooks and diary. Not being unbiased, police also tried to pressurise Shradhha's father threatening him that 'he wouldn't be able to show his face to anyone'. He has also been threatened that he would be framed for the incident. Shradhha's father insists to know the real cause of the death and wants justice. For the same, he has filed an FIR expressing his doubt that it is murder in Bansjor police station.

Information received from Shradhha's school:

On visiting the school, the fact finding team was informed by the Principal and teachers that Shradhha was a brilliant scholar and an efficient player. She has won several medals and was a topper in class. Shradhha was enrolled in the school till class 8th and discontinued after that for a brief period. Since Shradhha had been a good performer, school had initiated to get her to rejoin. Shradhha rejoined her schooling in June 2019 in class 9th. The Saturday on which Shradhha went missing, the same week on 6th August Shradhha had fainted during school, and was hospitalised. Owing to her ill health, she was absent on 7th August. In the school, Michael Minz trained students in hockey, he was the one who had connected Shradhha with Mary Purty.

Information received from Sunandini Bage's family:

Sunandini (23) is the third child of the family. Her family members are Anthunia Poorty (mother), Vijay Bage (father), Arvind Bage (younger brother) and Pramod Bage (elder brother). They are residents of Lachhada village in Orissa, and for income, depend on agriculture and labour work. Sunandini was a hockey player and had passed class 10th in 2012. Since last two years, she was staying with Mary Poorty (hockey coach) who was supposed to help train her in hockey and continue her education, and had taken her to stay in her house in Hamirpur, Rourkela. During the interaction with Sunandini's family, it came up that Mary Poorty and her family used to trouble Sunandini. Sunandini has come to her house in Lachhada with Shradhha on 27 July 2019 last.

Incident details (As told by Sunandini's family):

Sunandini was found dead on Sunday, 11 August, 2019. A day before that on 10 August, 2019, Saturday, around 3 pm in the afternoon, Sonam Poorty had dropped all the belongings of Sunandini to her house. She had also conveyed that Sunandini will not return. After dropping Sunandini's belongings, Sonam left. The next day, Sonam informed of Sunandini's death through a relative of Anthunia Poorty over phone.

Reactions and responses of Mary Poorty's family and other people present during interaction with the fact-finding team:

Information of Mary Purti's family member and associate:

The fact-finding team reached Mary Purti's house for information related to the death and interacted with family members, which revealed that Salim Purti (son), Sonam Purti (daughter), Salim's wife, Pushpa Lohar (hockey player and witness), and two other girls, lived with Poorty and her husband. Mary Purti is the Vice Secretary of the Lok Janshakti Party, Odisha and gets women players from different places to prepare for the hockey tournament under Koshish Trust. Dilip Samant (Mary's associate and LJP activist) also helps in this preparation, Mary Purti's husband works at Rourkela Steel Plant.

Incident (according to information from Mary Purti's family members and neighbors):

Dilip Samant: When the fact-finding team reached Mary Purti's house, they first met Dilip Samant (Mary's colleague and LJP activist), he opened the door and started speaking in a hostile manner without asking the team's introduction. He repeated that Simdega (Bansjor) police has asked them to not to talk to anyone. Dilip angrily said that that was not his house, he is an Odia man, who just came there for some work, there is no one at home Mary and Sonam have gone to church a while back and will come by evening. When he was asked if he could call them and ask them to return, he changed the conversation and said that he had gone to church in the morning. He was non – cooperative throughout the interaction and gave vague responses.

Salim Purti and his wife: Salim said that in the month of January, around 20 women hockey players were brought to practice for the hockey tournament held in Delhi, all these players used to practice in the stadium located in Sector-5 of Rourkela Steel Plant and lived in the plant's residence, soon after the tournament was over, all the players except Shradhha,

Sunandini and Pushpa went to their respective homes. Salim's wife told that Sunandini was wandering around midnight on 9th August and hadn't slept before leaving before leaving around 4 am. Explaining further, they said that these two did not interact much with Sunandini because she was busy with childcare of her infant, therefore, she wouldn't be able to provide significant information. In the end, she did not answer the questions and went inside the house in anger. Salim and his wife refused to give information on questions pertaining to Sunandini and expressed lack of information.

Mary Purti and Sonam Purti: They told that they had healthy interactions with Sunandini and lived together as a family. On Saturday, August 10, around 4 o'clock in the morning, Sunandini left from there. Sonam Purti told that at 11 o'clock in the night, Sunandini's SMS came to her, which says, 'She has made a mistake, and she apologizes' on asking the reason for Sunandini's sudden leaving and apology via SMS, Sunandini refused to give information to Sonam. On checking the phone, it was found that all the call details of Sonam before August 13 were erased. There was no cooperation in giving other information related to Sunandini.

Pushpa Lohar (witness): According to Pushpa Lohar (14), there was a love affair between Shradha and Sunandini. Pushpa told that Shradha's father Rajesh Soreng Hai was married thrice and he used to beat Shradha. According to Pushpa, disturbed by all of this, Shradha had tried to commit suicide by jumping in a well earlier. She suggests due to these troubles, the girls might have committed suicide, as the Post Mortem Report shows.

According to the neighbor: According to him, there was a fight in the coach's house three days ago and Sunandini was walking outside the house at midnight the same day. People residing around Mary Purti's family had little interaction with coach's family.

Why the need for re-examination?

False statement of witness: Shradha's family and villagers told that all the statements made by Pushpa Lohar (witness) are false and all these allegations are false, Shradha and Sunandini were good friends, Shradha's father Rajesh Soreng has only been married once. Shradha was of cheerful nature and loved by the family, his father would never beat her. She used to swim from a young age and it wasn't possible to commit suicide in the well as mentioned by Pushpa.

Post Mortem Report: Three Doctors S. K. Murmu, Anil Kumar and Manoj Kumar Dungdung have done a post-mortem of Shradha Soreng and Sunandini's body, and found the cause of death to be hanging from the rope. In this report, the age of Shradha was stated to be 18 years instead of 14 years. Police threatened Sunandini's family not to show the post mortem report to anyone.

Police threatens families: The police, far from helping families, have threatened them. Shraddha's father was threatened that he would be made an accused. The family members of Sunandini have also been threatened not to show the post mortem report. Shraddha's father was not supported. Attempt was made to intimidate him, when he raised his suspicion of murder.

An attempt to suppress the case because of taboo around homosexuality: In this entire incident, according to the statements of the police and witnesses, homosexuality been used as an allegation and multiple moral judgements based on that created the biases. In the light of Supreme Court's judgement of decriminalising homosexuality, it shows how the stigma around the same in procedures of justice lead to biases and injustice and violation of fundamental rights of life with dignity

Related to Marry Purti and Sonam Purti: Sonam Purti's phone details were erased before August 13. She was aware of the happenings throughout. She dropped Sunandini's belongings and a day before the incident and suggested that Sunandini wouldn't return. No admissions were made to any educational institution despite Mary Purti bringing the girls with an assurance of education alongside hockey training.

Fact-finding teams demands that:

- **Jharkhand and Odisha Police should re - investigate this incident.**
- **Last time, an SMS had been sent to Sonam Purti from Sunandini's phone. Poorti and her family's involvements should be investigated wrt FIR under section 306.**
- **There should be sensitization and appropriate action against investigating officials who perpetuated homophobia and threatened Shraddha's father.**
- **The Government of Jharkhand should ensure that during the investigation related to this incident, Shradha and Sunandini's family are not pressurized and full government support is provided.**

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