

Muslim Extremists Suspected in Death of Christian Worker in India

Family members of a Christian worker who was found dead in a Muslim area in Jharkhand state a day after the Islamic Eid festival said they suspect he may have been murdered by local residents.

The body of Shravan Kumar, who had worked with the Gospel Echoing Missionary Society, was found lying in a well near the Idgah Mosque in Garhwa town in the wee hours of Sept. 13, a close relative of the deceased told Compass by phone.

Kumar, 31, lived in Pratapgarh district in neighboring Uttar Pradesh state. He left for Garhwa, 40 miles from his house, saying he wanted to see a colleague there on Sept 10.

“But neither did he visit the colleague, nor did he get back home,” said the relative.

On Sept. 15, a family member went to Garhwa looking for him. He found his picture in an advertisement police had placed in a local newspaper in an effort to identify the body.

“When Kumar’s body was handed over to the family, it was beyond recognition; it had swollen,” said the relative.

Later, the family member went to the well in Garhwa where the body was found. Local youths who pulled Kumar’s body from the well the morning of Sept. 13 informed the family member that they noticed injuries on his face and around his neck. Police were immediately informed, but officers did not arrive until 10 p.m.

“Kumar had lived in a rented house in Garhwa a few years ago, and on the morning of Sept. 12 he visited his old landlord and

mentioned that he planned to preach in the Idgah Mosque area," said the source, adding that Kumar's family suspected "that he preached to the Muslims on the Eid festival, and as a result he was killed and thrown in the well."

A police spokesman, however, said he refused to believe that Kumar was murdered. Deputy Superintendent of Police Ashok Kumar Singh told Compass that "as of now" police were not exploring any possibility of a crime.

"The post-mortem report says there was no injury mark on his body, and he died by drowning," Singh said.

In 1998, Kumar had received a head injury after suspected Hindu nationalist extremists hit him with a rod in Sitamani in neighbouring Bihar, the relative said.

"Since then, he had been suffering from a mild psychological ailment," he added. "If he did not take his daily medicine, he would get a little disturbed and begin to preach to non-Christians aggressively. This is what may have happened on Sept. 12 when he preached in the Muslim area."

Kumar, who became a Christian from a Hindu background in 1997, held prayer meetings in his house shortly after his conversion against the wishes of local Hindu nationalists, the relative added.

The religious atmosphere in India was tense at the time of his death. On Sept. 13, Muslim mobs burned a Christian school and a church, both belonging to the Church of North India (CNI), in the Muslim-majority Kashmir region in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. No students or staff members of the school were hurt, but at least five Muslims died and more than 50 were injured as security officers opened fire at the mob to prevent the burning of the school.

Also, on Aug. 13 Muslims attempted to burn a CNI hospital in Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag district, but security forces

managed to prevent it. In a separate incident the same day and in the same state, a mob vandalized the Catholic-run Good Shepherd High School in Pulwama district.

In a similar incident the same day, Muslims in Malerkotla town in northern Punjab state burned the furniture of a CNI church.

These incidents took place after the Quran was allegedly desecrated in the United States. Although Florida Pastor Terry Jones had withdrawn the threat to burn the Quran to mark the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Iranian government-run news channel Press TV showed dubious clips of the Quran being torn in the U.S.

Kumar's family fears that the police will overlook the available clues indicating the role of local Muslims and instead claim that he committed suicide.

"No one who knew Kumar can believe that he could have committed suicide," said the relative. "Although he was psychologically unwell, he always faced life's problems boldly."

Kumar, the sole bread winner in the family, is survived by a 25-year-old wife and a 5-year-old daughter.

According to the 2001 Census, Jharkhand has a population of around 27 million, out of which percent are Christian. Muslims account for close to 14 percent of the state's population.