

BAN SUCH TEACHING SHOPS!

Sujata's Death—Murder or Suicide ?

—A Special Investigative Report for **Manushi** by Nirlep Malhans and Jyoti Sanghera

ON THE night of September 22, 1979, Gohana, a small town 35 kms. west of Sonapat in Haryana was rocked by a horrifying incident, the reverberations of which have not yet died down. This incident was the death of a 21-year-old girl named Sujata who hailed from a village in the Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh. Sujata, the daughter of a school teacher, joined an Arts and Crafts course in Indira College, Gohana, only a fortnight before she died. The principal of the college, Umed Singh Gulia, registered Sujata's death at the local police station at 7.30 a.m. on September 23. Sujata's body had been discovered by the manager of the college who is also the father-in-law of U.S. Gulia, at 4.30 a.m. on September 23. In the course of a routine check-up of the sheds and out-houses, he discovered that contrary to customary practice, the lights of the kitchen, which is 100 yards away from the hostel rooms, were not burning. Moving into the dark kitchen, he stumbled on the dead body of Sujata. The police and the college management allege that the girl was electrocuted through wires which had been pulled down from the overhead circuit and which, in the photographs shown to us, were dangling low on the floor from a height of about eight to ten feet.

The post-mortem conducted more than 26 hours later, at the local hospital, showed that Sujata died due to suffocation of lungs and lack of oxygen, which could have been caused by electrocution. Two electrocution marks were discovered on her left palm and left arm.

However, the question to be emphasised is: If Sujata's death was caused by mere electrocution, what motivated about six or seven thousand people to come out on the streets on

September 24, a day after her death? This crowd demanded that the post-mortem be conducted at Chandigarh, Rohtak or Sonapat instead of at Gohana, so that impartiality could be ensured. They also demanded a judicial enquiry into the affair. To press their demands, this milling multitude comprising mainly students of several vocational institutes at Gohana, organized a total city bandh. When the body was shifted to the local hospital, they picketed outside in a bid to prevent the local doctor from



Sujata

conducting the post-mortem. This vast demonstration was unique — never before in the entire history of Gohana has such a large cross-section of the people, irrespective of class, caste or occupation come together in a united manner to voice their protest.

The police tried to crush the peaceful demonstrators by lathi, charging them indiscriminately. Some goondas, like Shamsher Singh, hired by U.S. Gulia, fired at the crowd, injuring a few people. The people dispersed in panic and set fire to two police jeeps. Clearly then, the

people of Gohana expected foul play in the death of Sujata and their anger was directed against the principal Gulia, a person of ill repute.

The Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, owned and run by Gulia and popularly known as Indira College is one of eight or nine such privately owned vocational institutes which have sprung up in Gohana over the last decade. Gohana is a small town with a population of approximately 20,000 people. Of a total of 50 units allocated by the Haryana State Government to private agencies, sanctioning them to establish vocational schools, 30 units are distributed among these few institutes at Gohana. Almost all the students at the schools are not natives of Haryana. They come from Punjab and Himachal Pradesh.

Local students are perhaps more aware of the dubious reputation of the institutes. All the individuals interviewed asserted that these institutes are mere money-making rackets, geared to maximizing profits. The proprietor-principals of these schools are known to have procured licences through political and financial influence. Despite considerable proportions of profits siphoned off to feed politicians, the bureaucracy and the police, the principals succeed in culling out a handsome share for themselves. Gulia has reportedly, within the six years of his having established the institute, managed to amass immovable property worth ten lakh rupees and liquid assets worth five lakhs.

These institutes are rumoured to charge exorbitant sums of money during admissions and as fees for helping students obtain diplomas through cheating and other devious means. It is also alleged that the annual expenditure for each student varies from five to six

thousand. Among all these institutes, Indira College has the worst reputation because of both Gulia's past and the present functioning of the college.

Gulia is infamous for his communal attitudes. He was compelled to resign from government service when his attempt at converting the third division of his M.A. degree into a second in order to get selected for appointment to a government college, was exposed. During his tenure at the MWM Memorial College, Gohana, he married one of his students even though he already had a wife and child.

In 1971, through his contact with Shyam Chand, a Congress-I minister in the Bansi Lal government, he and his father-in-law set up a degree college for girls. However, Gulia quarrelled with his father-in-law and established the Indira College.

This college, like its sister institutes in Gohana, provides vocational training in the fields of stenography, civil draughtsmanship, home science, tailoring and arts and crafts. It was described by the local residents as being very understaffed, with U.S. Gulia, his wife and father-in-law occupying the posts of principal, vice-principal and manager respectively. Most of the 150 girls at Indira College were hostelers and were reportedly kept under conditions of extreme severity and control. They were allowed out of the hostel only with their parents and married sisters. Every night, all girls were herded into one hall where two girls shared a charpoy. Providing less than minimum amenities, the Gulias tried to keep the cost of running the college as low as possible. There were fixed charges for several illegal practices like completing attendance requirements.

It is also alleged that when external examiners came to conduct annual examinations, not only were pecuniary gifts made to them, but Gulia with a contingent of girl students, waited on them hand and foot. The local people hold that the girls were made to cook for the examiners who lived as Gulia's personal guests in his ostentatious



U.S. Gulia

house and they were also expected to "entertain" these men.

Sujata was admitted into the second year of her course. A sum of Rs. 900 was extracted from her as payment for completing her attendance for the previous term, the examination for which was held internally. A fortnight after her admission, the college was conducting its annual examinations. It is alleged that Sujata with some other girls, was summoned to the principal's house to entertain the examiners. Views diverge over the possible events that occurred on the night of September 22. The most popular version runs thus: in the course of the evening, Sujata was sexually molested. To curb her attempts at resisting and calling for help, she was either deliberately or accidentally smothered to death. It is reported that Gulia and his friends tried to dispose of her body by throwing it on the road so that any passing vehicle could run over it. But to avoid the danger of being seen, they finally dumped the body in the college kitchen and pulled the wiring down to make it appear like a suicide case. These same sources hold that the electrocution marks on her body were made after her death.

In handling this case, the police played a very deplorable role which was

clearly determined by political influence and financial manipulation. It has been verified that Gulia withdrew more than one lakh rupees from two different banks the day after Sujata died. Since there is no account of this money, it is not difficult to conjecture where it went. In a small town like Gohana, state level politicians, local bureaucracy and influential families like Gulia's act in collusion with each other. They are protected by the police who act as their henchmen. This has created such terror among people that they are afraid to talk openly of the incident.

The local police are only too likely to manipulate evidence, as was clear from what some officials had to say. The A.S.I., Gohana, categorically ruled out rape or any outward sign of molestation and precluded the possibility of Gulia's hand in the incident. This confident statement even though the chemical report of the viscera is still awaited! Many people of Gohana allege that the police were deeply involved in tampering with the post-mortem. The local police claim that it is a clear-cut case of suicide as the girl whose engagement had just been broken off, must have been in a depressed state of mind!

Suicide is an unconvincing explanation of Sujata's death for several reasons. According to some persons who saw the body in the kitchen, her face was smeared with ash in an obvious attempt to conceal scratches and bruises. Surprisingly enough, there were no traces of ash anywhere else on the body, or even in the kitchen. While her hair was dishevelled and covered with mud, the salwar kameez she wore was impeccably clean and ironed. Her feet were bare. This appearance of hers is not commensurate with the police version that she was in bed till 1.30 a.m. Moreover, electrocution as a means of suicide is not likely to occur to a simple village girl, especially since the wiring is secured on a wooden plank eight to ten feet above the ground. People who examined the kitchen insist that not only is it difficult to reach the wiring given the absence of any object high enough

to stand on, but it is also near impossible to cut the wire without a sharp instrument. The voltage in Gohana undergoes a lot of fluctuation and is normally low. This reduces the possibility of suicide.

Of utmost importance is the inability of the police to determine the immediate motive of suicide. If Sujata was depressed, why would she come all the way to Gohana to commit suicide? After her death, Gulia locked up all the girls in the institute to prevent them from communicating with anyone outside and planted armed men in the college premises. Why?

The behaviour of the police in handling the demonstrators is also very questionable. More than 35 demonstrators were arrested on charges of rioting while the firing resorted to by Gulia's goondas was defended by some police officials as a necessary measure to protect the police, the institute and to put an end to the rioting. Since when have the police started needing hired goondas to protect them from the public? It is ironical that Gulia was arrested only on October 5 and that too on public demand! But when the same public demanded that the post-mortem be held outside Gohana, the police turned a deaf ear.

The death of Sujata clearly brings out the manner in which the local bureaucracy, the police, the politicians and their stooges like Gulia, together constitute an oppressive machinery. Institutes like Indira College function as a means of amassing wealth. In the pursuit of this objective, women of the institute become objects of sexual and financial exploitation. While a judicial probe has been ordered into the circumstances surrounding Sujata's death, the case is likely to be forgotten unless vigorously pursued. But this incident should not be treated as an isolated one. We appeal to all the progressive organizations and individuals to demand that the state take over all such teaching shops in Haryana. □

Delhi Street Song

I watch from my glass-paned door
The streets are filled with movement,
The city hums with life.

Sister, don't you see it?
The strut of the servant boy,
his lungis stiff with dirt?
Girl, can't you feel it—
the pride in the old man's eye,
a grandson in his arms?

I only sit behind this window
She can't unlock her garden door.

Brother, won't you notice
the daughter-in-law's soft weeping,
smell the kerosene-stained hands?
Son, you mean you didn't hear it,
your grandmother's lone sighing,
the rub of the rope-hung fan?

I must make the family's living,
I can't dream of foreign lands.

Uncle, was it you who felt desire,
Took her body with your gold-ringed hand?
Heard her whispers in the curtained room?
Father, did you hear her praying?
Memories waning, find her
mumbling to a darkened shrine?

I don't know the women's language,
Daughter, I can't hear some mother's words.

When the vendor sells his *tikki*, brother,
do you hear his prices clear?
When the curry's off the fire, father,
can't you smell it from afar?

I am just my mother's darling, sister,
He is woman's pride and fear.

Do you see her clearly, sister,
face hidden in the sari's end?
Feel the pinching in the buses,
hear the "brother's" taunting words?
Will you follow in her footsteps
walking minced, avoiding stares?

Am I not my mother's daughter, sister
Can I hold my head up high?
Does our father hear our voices?
Can we do anything but cry?

We are not just female servants, sister
and I'm damned if I'll just die.
Joined together there is power, sister—
No one hears the victim's sigh.

—Arlene Zide