

R G Kar Hospital rape and murder facts and glimmer of hopes

The brutal rape and murder of a female doctor (PGT) inside the building that houses the emergency department (where patients come and go 24 hours a day) of R G Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata on 8 August night and the over-activism on the part of the College authorities particularly the then principal Dr Sandeep Ghosh (now suspended), his nexus members and the police to hush up all evidences to shield the culprits have awakened the conscience of everyone not only in this state but throughout the country, even overseas.



Protest rally against R G Kar Hospital gang rape and murder incident by doctors, nurses, paramedics, health activists, in Kolkata on 7 September

The incident

The crime scene was on the fourth floor, where indoor and emergency services for chest medicine are located, and there is constant movement of patients. There were three other junior doctors, several nursing staff, Group D employees, and attendants working there, along with hospitalized patients. Adjacent to the crime scene were the doctors' room and the seminar room. The victim doctor stated to be very amiable, diligent and caring, had been on duty for 36 consecutive hours, to be exact, forced to work for such long hours by the authorities. On that night, she had dinner around midnight with three male junior doctors. According to reports, she went to rest around 3 a.m. Her half-naked, mutilated body was discovered in the seminar room around 9 am the next morning. The college principal, Dr. Sandeep Ghosh, who is alleged to have long been running various illegal syndicates and various rackets, manipulating results to have his lackeys pass examinations without attending classes and sitting in the examinations, had, instead

of taking necessary action forthwith, first questioned why had she gone to the seminar room alone so late at night. The assistant superintendent on duty called the victim's family and informed that their daughter was unwell. So they should come quickly to the hospital. Shortly after that, she again called them to say that she was seriously ill and was being taken to the emergency department. Later, the police called to tell her family that her condition was critical. Finally, the assistant superintendent informed the parents of the victim that their daughter had committed suicide. Evidently, these multiple versions of the authorities raised question whether they were covering up something.

In fact, they attempted to pass it off as a suicide and hurried to conduct a superficial post-mortem through their loyal forensic experts and cremate the body quickly. Meanwhile, the college authorities, with the active cooperation of the police, and under pretext of repair and renovation, demolished a significant part of the crime scene. But the protesting junior doctors compelled the authorities to stall the 'mysterious' renovation work. Then a large police force surrounded the hospital, preventing anyone, including the victim's parents, from entering. It was later revealed that several outsiders, including some pro-government medical leaders, had been present at the crime scene since the morning. Even her parents were made to wait for hours to have a glimpse of the dead body. Under pressure from the protesting doctors and nurses, the police agreed to conduct a post-mortem in the presence of a magistrate and with video recording.

However, after the post-mortem, the police, accompanied by a large force and the Rapid Action Force (RAF), hastily took the body to the crematorium. Even there, the body was cremated without the consent of the victim's parents. The father of the victim alleged that the Kolkata Police hurried the cremation process. Astonishingly, a ruling TMC leader from Panihati region had signed in the cremation certificate. The whole episode was fishy and smacked of a concerted effort to cover up a horrid crime.

Protests surged forth in no time

As the news of this brutal murder spread, medical associations like the Medical Service Center and Service Doctors' Forum, along with the junior doctors and medical students at the hospital, burst out in protests. For long, they have been protesting against gross mismanagement, absence of necessary infrastructure and safety measures, large scale corruption, open nepotism and domination of a powerful lobby have been behind the rapid deterioration of the government healthcare system in the state. This nauseous incident bore proof about the correctness of their allegations.

Eventually, this sparked further outrage. Junior doctors across the state began demanding justice and went on strike. Many senior doctors, nurses, health workers, and medical students joined the movement. Ordinary citizens, driven by their conscience, also started participating in large numbers. Kolkata once again became a city of processions, a city of rising up against injustice. And in no time, the movement spread across the country.

However, on the night of 14 August, while people across the state were holding night protests with the slogan "Reclaim the Night", hundreds of armed miscreants, backed by the ruling party, entered the R.G. Kar Medical College and vandalized the emergency department. They dismantled the protesters' stage and warned the junior doctors and nurses of dire consequences in case anyone opened their mouth. Their intention was to destroy the crime scene, but they mistakenly demolished the fifth floor instead of the fourth floor. All of this happened in the presence of the Police Commissioner of Kolkata, a large police force, and the RAF.

Government's attempt to tamper with evidence

The government's attempt to destroy evidence and suppress the movement through threat and intimidation only backfired. The movement intensified, leading to the formation of the 'West Bengal Junior Doctors' Front' to lead it. To quell public anger, the police arrested a notorious criminal, tried to frame him as the guilty. This man, Sanjay Roy, was actually a civic volunteer and a close associate of Dr. Sandeep Ghosh, the then-principal. He also had blessings of a local police officer. Roy was involved in shady dealings at the hospital, accepting large sums of money to get patients admitted and to provide medical care. He was also alleged to have been a part of the racket trading illegally in hospital wastes.

Questions obviously arose as to how could a single person inflict such grievous injuries to the victim, as described in the inquest report. The report mentioned severe injuries in 18 places on the body, including a fractured ankle joint, broken hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage, bleeding from the eyes, bleeding from vagina—clear evidence of gang-rape and then strangulation to death. It cannot be the handiwork of one person. So there has been no taker to the theory that Sanjay was the lone perpetrator of the crime.

Moreover, it has come to light that even post-mortem was done after 4 PM overruling the stipulations in the medical directory though there is enough infrastructure for preserving dead bodies. Even the mortuary assistant was changed and someone close to the notorious 'coterie' was brought. Even there are contradictory versions about the dress of the victim. While one report says there was no cloth in the lower part of the body, another says the upper part was bare. It is also reported that a mobile phone was found under the carpet of the crime spot.

Customary gimmicks of the government

As public outrage continued to grow, the state chief minister and the TMC supremo suddenly became vocal for hanging of the arrested individual. Abhishek Banerjee, the second-in-command of the ruling TMC, advocated for an encounter killing. This raised further suspicions that the government was trying to suppress evidence and was not in favour of a detailed investigation to unearth the truth. If the arrested man was killed, it would put a lid on the investigation and others who are suspected to have been involved in this horrific crime and who supported them would escape unscathed. But this trickery did not work and protesting junior doctors, nurses, paramedics and common people including professionals from various walks of life stood firm on the demand for a proper and thorough investigation.

As a result, the movement is gaining momentum, raising questions about the role of the police and administration. Discussions are now surfacing about the possible reasons behind such a grave incident. Was this merely a case of rape and murder and then remove all evidences, or it was well-planned crime with many more 'powerful' figures involved in hatching the conspiracy? Is it that the victim had come to know about the raging corruption, scandals and other thriving illicit activities and hence was the need to gag her voice for good?

Rampant corruption and crime plaguing state healthcare system

As we mentioned above, various corruptions within the health department are already coming to light. Syndicate rule dominates not only at R.G. Kar Medical College but in the entire health department. One of the key figures of this racket is Dr. Sandeep Ghosh, along with a handful of junior doctors closely connected with the ruling party like Dr. Avik De, currently a PGT at SSKM Hospital; Dr. Birupaksha Biswas, a Senior Resident at Burdwan Medical College; Dr. Mustafizur Rahman Mallick, House Staff at Midnapur Medical College; Dr. Sushanta Roy, Vice President of the West Bengal Medical Council; and Dr. Shyampada Das, the personal doctor of the chief minister, are among others. This nexus is commonly referred to as the infamous 'North Bengal lobby'.

This syndicate has been corrupting the healthcare sector for years, demanding huge sums of money from MBBS students to pass or receive honors degrees, sometimes extorting as much as five to seven lakh rupees from each student. Professors were also pressurized to fail genuine and even studious students unless they fattened the purse of the 'lobby'. On the other hand, the students currying favour with the 'lobby' either because of giving bribes or being instrumental in operationalizing various 'projects' of the syndicates run by the 'lobby', were not needed to sit for the examination or even attend classes for passing out. Even mass copying in the examinations was facilitated against hefty payments. For MD/MS students, large amounts of money were taken to sign off their thesis papers. In the case of female doctors, some professors would sexually harass them by summoning them to their homes for thesis approvals. Moreover, various types of extortion were rampant at the college. Purchases worth crores of rupees were made without any tenders or quotations. Appointments, transfers, postings and promotion of the Medical College professors were also decided by that 'lobby' in exchange for lump sum payment with the state health department acting as an accomplice. Some doctors, due to family pressures, compromise with these health mafias, while others, who cannot meet their demands or refuse to compromise, face disruptions of their personal lives and are forced to work in distant areas for years.

Entire corrupt system was flourishing under the leadership of Dr. Sandeep Ghosh at R.G. Kar Medical College, and it was rapidly spreading to other colleges. Dr Ghosh also is alleged to have been trafficking dead bodies, recycling expired medicines, encouraging necrophilia to feed porn-sites and even running a sex racket within the hospital. Culturally degraded junior doctors and medical students are handpicked by this syndicate. These individuals create a culture of threats in colleges and hospitals, bringing with them habits of drinking, drug addiction, and violent

behavior. Wastes were being recycled illegally. Even the hostels are infiltrated, turning some of the brightest students into morally degraded individuals. Service Doctors' Forum repeatedly submitted deputations and protested to health authorities against this mafia raj reigning supreme. But no action was taken. The authorities often claimed their hands were tied due to instructions from 'higher-ups'.

Under pressure of protest of the junior doctors, senior doctors and enraged common people, Dr Sandeep Ghosh has now been arrested by the CBI. While this incident may be rare in the country, such corruptions are equally prevalent in other states. In Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Kerala, no transfer is made without paying a fixed sum to health mafias. The same applies to appointments. Therefore, syndicate rule exists in other states as well.

Latest developments

Pertinent to recall that the Supreme Court had taken suo motu cognizance of the incident and directed the CBI who was entrusted with investigation of the case to find out the truth with due expediency. Though CBI in its initial report has confirmed complicity of Dr Sandeep Ghosh in all illegal and corrupt acts, it, in its hearing on 9 September, gave a week's time to CBI for furnishing further details thereby delaying the judicial procedure. Since one month has passed away and nothing tangible has happened in unravelling the truth behind the lady doctor's rape and murder, the supreme Court's decision has indeed disappointed the people at large. What is further, the Supreme Court bench headed by the Chief Justice directed the protesting junior doctors to resume duties by 10 September evening. But the doctors who found that justice has been still eluding them, have decided to continue their movement.

What is more despicable is that the state chief minister, just after the supreme court's directive, asked the fighting doctors and people to give up path of agitation. "If you stay on the roads every night, it will cause inconvenience for many people, especially the elders. There is a bar on using microphones after 10 p.m. which we have ignored so far. I will request all of you to get back to the festival mood," she said. This exhortation has drawn scathing criticism from the protesting junior doctors and the broader section of the masses who are also spontaneously coming out in the streets in solidarity with the doctors. Even the lawyer defending the state government in the Supreme Court has alleged that 23 patients have died because of non-availability of treatment in the government hospitals as a result of the cesswork of the junior doctors. Refuting this allegation as false and malicious, the Junior doctors said that both emergency and out patient departments (OPDs) are open and they are also running Abhaya Clinics outside the hospitals. All senior doctors are attending OPDs. The junior doctors also challenged the claim of 23 deaths saying that they have enough evidence to prove the falsity of such a charge. In fact, the state government is responsible for prolonging the cesswork as it is not resolving the five most legitimate demands of theirs which includes justice for the victim, the resignation of the Kolkata Police Commissioner, State Health Secretary, Director of Health Education (DHE), and Director of Health Services (DHS), failing which they said they would continue the movement. In the meanwhile, people in gushes are taking part in different kinds of innumerable protest agitations

like processions, night-long candle light rallies, 'lights off' at home, participation in people's courts in different parts of the state etc. This massive participation in protest movement even at the interior villages was never seen after independence.

It is clear that people have been disgusted with the failure of the governments, both at the Centre and in the states, to ameliorate any of their basic problems of life like price rise, unemployment, fragile healthcare system, crumbling of the very edifice of education as well as the rising crimes, atrocities against women, rampant corruption and overlordism of the ruling party-backed mafias and musclemen.

The accumulated grievances are bursting forth centring round the R G Kar hospital tragedy. Also it is important to note that the ruling dispensation is arraying its entire arsenal to dehumanize the masses particularly the youths and students who have been undergoing extreme ethical-moral-cultural degradation. The ruling class and its subservient governments have been rotting the society to the point where women are viewed as objects of consumption. So the base instincts are incited leading to soaring number of rapes and gang-rapes across the country. The brutal rape and murder of a young doctor at her workplace-once considered safer than home-bears an eloquent testimony to that.

Sparkle in pervading darkness

Thus, today's movement is not only a demand for severe punishment for the real culprits of the R G Kar hospital crime but also a fight to dismantle the mafia rule that has entrenched itself in medical colleges and hospitals.

It is also a movement that has roused the spirit of protest against injustice and petrifying the society to eat into the very vitals of life. The massive public awakening in the wake of the R.G. Kar incident is a glimmer of hope, a sparkle in the pervading darkness. Let the suffering people throw away all hesitations and fears, join hands in movement against injustice and the young generation refuse to be emasculated from within and reflect a moral revival.