

Mysterious braid-chopping bandits have Kashmiris in panic

October 24 2017, by Aijaz Hussain



In this Sept 18, 2017 photo, Tasleema Bilal , right, and her teenage niece Kousain Ajaz, show their chopped braids inside their home in Srinagar, India. Unidentified assailants have chopped off long-braided hair of over 100 mostly teenage girls and young women since last month in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The attacks have intensified fear and panic, protests and even vigilantes in the disputed Himalayan region, where most population is already exhausted and traumatized by decades of brutal conflict. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

Hundreds of young men—armed with knives, cricket bats and iron

rods—patrol the nighttime streets of India-controlled Kashmir these days, hoping their ad-hoc vigilante groups will deter the mysterious bandits reportedly chopping off women's long, woven hair.

In more than 100 cases confounding police over the past month, women said they were attacked by masked men who sliced off their braids.

The attacks—most reportedly occurring inside people's homes—are so strange that police initially suggested women were suffering from hallucinations, until the government-run Women's Commission warned them against making dismissive comments.

The region's top elected official, Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, tweeted recently that the braid-chopping was an attempt "to create mass hysteria and undermine the dignity of the women in the state."

Still, police have no suspects and no leads, and no clue about the motives for the attacks.

"We're frightened," said Tasleema Bilal, a 40-year-old woman whose hair was hacked off last week while she was in her home in Srinagar, the region's main city. She said she tried to remove the man's mask, but "he was very strong, and like a commando almost snapped my neck" before escaping, leaving her hair behind.

Just days earlier, Bilal's 16-year-old niece had also been knocked out by a blow to the head with a brick, only to wake up later in a hospital to find her hair also gone. Other women have said they were knocked unconscious with a mysterious chemical spray that authorities have yet to identify.



In this Sept 18, 2017 photo, a 40-year-old woman Tasleema Bilal cries as she speaks with the Associated Press after her braid was chopped off by unidentified assailants, inside their home in Srinagar, India. "We're frightened," said Bilal, whose hair was hacked off Monday night while she was in her Srinagar home. She said she tried to remove the man's mask, but "he was very strong and like a commando almost snapped my neck" before escaping, leaving her hair behind. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

The mysterious braid thefts have spread fear and panic in the heavily militarized and disputed Himalayan region, where many among the mostly Muslim population already feel traumatized after decades of conflict between separatist rebels and India soldiers.

Similar incidents of hair banditry were reported earlier this year elsewhere in India, including in the northern states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. But nowhere have the attacks sparked such panic and vigilantism as in Kashmir.

While Kashmiri Muslim women traditionally wear their hair long like women in other parts of India, most cover it with headscarves out of cultural modesty.

Separatist leaders, angry at the initial reactions by police, said the attacks were the "handiwork of Indian agencies" trying to cower Kashmir's rebellious population, which is widely opposed to Indian rule.

Residents are also suspicious of the Indian authorities, and some have accused soldiers and police of staging the attacks or protecting those responsible.

"We want to know who the culprit is: police, army or civilians?" Bilal said.



In this Sept 18, 2017 photo, Kousain Ajaz, whose braid was chopped off by unidentified assailants, is comforted by her mother inside their home in Srinagar,

India. The 16-year-old had been knocked out by a blow to the head with a brick, only to wake later in the hospital to find her hair also gone. Unidentified assailants have chopped off long-braided hair of over 100 mostly teenage girls and young women since last month in Indian-controlled Kashmir. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

Police Inspector-General Muneer Ahmed Khan said it was ludicrous to think authorities were involved. Authorities said they would pay about \$9,000 for clues leading to any of the culprits.

"It's important to first know the motive behind such acts rather than who the culprit is," Khan said. "Once the motive is established, it would be easy for us to solve such cases."

This is not the first time bizarre reports have spread fear in Kashmir, which has known little else but conflict since India and Pakistan gained independence in 1947 and each claimed the region as its own. The rival countries have since fought two wars over the mountain territory, and each administers a part of it. On the Indian side, an ongoing rebellion has left at least 70,000 people dead in rebel attacks and subsequent Indian military crackdowns since 1989.

Amid massive anti-India demonstrations in the early 1990s, some began reporting ghosts haunting neighborhoods across the region at night. Eventually, many blamed Indian paramilitary commandos for dressing up as ghosts to spook the local population.

When the braid-hacking incidents were first reported in July across northern India, officials brought psychiatrists into the investigation to determine whether the women reporting the cases were suffering mental illness.

The suspicion that women could be imagining the attacks grew stronger once the attacks spread to Kashmir, where the territorial conflict had caused widespread psychological trauma and other issues such as suicidal tendencies. Patient numbers at Srinagar's lone psychiatric hospital jumped from 1,700 a year to more than 100,000 annually after the conflict heated up in 1989.



In this Sept 18, 2017 photo, Tasleema Akhter speaks with the Associated Press after her braid was chopped off by unidentified assailants, in Srinagar, India. Assailants have chopped off long-braided hair of over 100 mostly teenage girls and young women since last month in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The attacks have intensified fear and panic, protests and even vigilantes in the disputed Himalayan region, where most population is already exhausted and traumatized by decades of brutal conflict. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

One-third of Kashmiris questioned in a 2006 Doctors Without Borders

survey said they had thought of killing themselves in the previous month.

While health experts dismissed the idea that women were imagining the [attacks](#), pending scientific verification, they warned that the braid banditry could push an already edgy population further to the brink.

"These instances will further complicate psychiatric problems present here," said Dr. Mohammed Maqbool, who heads the psychiatry department at Srinagar's Government Medical College.

Another scholar who studied psychiatric issues in Kashmir said it was not hard to believe women's bodies would be targeted in this way.

"Hair has historically symbolized sexuality and a certain excessive feminine energy, which is a direct threat, not just a target of militarized masculine forces," said Saiba Varma of the University of California, San Diego. "The braid-chopping seems to be a clear example of someone trying to curtail these feminine energies."

With the mystery unsolved, many Kashmiris have stopped traveling outside their neighborhoods after dusk, dealing a blow to local businesses.



In this Monday, Oct. 16, 2017 photo, Kashmiri protesters shout slogans during a protest over increasing braid chopping incidents in many parts of Kashmir, in Srinagar, Indian controlled Kashmir. In more than 100 cases confounding police over the past month, women said they were attacked by masked men who sliced off their braids. The attacks have intensified fear and panic, protests and even vigilantes in the disputed Himalayan region, where most population is already exhausted and traumatized by decades of brutal conflict. (AP Photo/Mukhtar Khan)

"Our business has shrunk to 10 percent of what we had before this braid-chopping started," cafe owner Syed Mukhtar said in Srinagar.

Meanwhile, men take turns on nighttime vigilante patrols, and some have beaten up so-called suspects only to find later that they were innocent, police said. One 70-year-old man died after vigilantes in a southern village mistook him for a suspect and smashed his head with a brick.

Several soldiers and [police](#) officials also have been thrashed by vigilantes. Police have arrested nearly two dozen people so far on charges of spreading rumors and beating people.

The hair-chopping attackers "are behaving like a typical Bollywood film villain who tries to harm female family members of the hero after failing to pin him down," said Srinagar university student Basharat Ahmed. "And through these (braid) choppers, the government is trying to convey to us that we can't protect our [women](#). But they'll fail in this scheme, too, God willing."

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