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Homicidal Hanging - Case Report (Bias In Premise Of Hanging)

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ABSTRACT

A lady, who was noticed hanging from a tree, was brought for autopsy. Neither the initial circumstances nor the autopsy was indicative of homicidal hanging. It is reported that killer's confession turned a simple case of hanging in to that of homicidal. The homicidal claim of the relatives of the deceased appeared incredible till the time actual assassins were caught. Could doctors conducting the autopsy have straightened the homicidal claim of the relatives? It is argued that with the kind of injuries the deceased had, he could not do. The case report discusses the bearing of autopsy on the decision-making of whether hanging was homicidal or suicidal. Autopsy alone may not differentiate suicidal from homicidal or post-mortem hanging.

Keywords: Hanging, Strangulation, Homicidal Hanging, Suicidal Strangulation

INTRODUCTION

Majority of the cases of hanging are suicidal in nature[(1-6)]. Homicidal hanging is singularly rare. The investigation of a person found hanging, throws up single question "*Is it a murder or suicide*". While the police provide the key to the vital question, the autopsy too has a bearing on the issue. Doctor conducting autopsy is expected to come out with some features that either support or reject a particular claim. A case of homicidal hanging is being reported to highlight that autopsy is insufficient in itself to establish that hanging was homicidal. Unless one takes in to account circumstantial story, autopsy is likely to fail to differentiate homicidal from suicidal hanging.

CASE REPORT



Figure 1. Side View of the Victim

Autopsy was done on the dead body of the thirty years old lady, who was noticed hanging from the bough of a “keekar” tree in a forest. The deceased was a divorced lady. A shawl was tied around her neck, which belonged to the deceased. As a slip-noose was used, ligature was in contact with the skin throughout the full circumference of the neck. There was mark of saliva dribbling from the left angle of her mouth. Except over the uppermost part of the right side of the neck ligature mark was faint and deficient on the back and sides. It was believed to correspond to the ligature material as soft as shawl. There was evidence of bruising on and around carotid vessels on the right side. She had abrasions on the upper front of her both legs and also over right side lower outer front of the abdomen. There was no bony injury in the air passages like the fracture or dislocation of the hyoid or thyroid indicative of manual strangulation.. Cause of death by all standards was hanging.

Doubt of homicide gained footings because father of the deceased held that earrings, that the deceased was always wearing, were missing from her ears. So much so the rumor of missing earring had converted in to news of recovery and seemed to have reached police ears while autopsy was going on. Police expected autopsy doctors to provide some vital clues regarding the nature of hanging. Dismissing earrings based homicide theory autopsy team apprised police, true her ears were without any earring but there was no fresh or recent injury in her ears. Ligature mark was believed to be the result of hanging, from a low point, for little period and in such a position that her legs were touching the ground. How could the body examination exclude that she could not and did not hang herself still appeared mysterious to the autopsy team?

Absence of earring in the ears of the deceased was not given much credence till it was recovered from the killers. Villagers handed over two boys to the police who were found selling the earrings of the deceased. Their confession of the crime straightened the homicidal claim of the relatives. They confessed that one of them raped her. They then rendered her unconscious during throttling.

They also confessed of having created a scene of hanging. According to them in her efforts to escape she even fell and sustained some injuries on the front of her legs. Just because she removed her earrings herself to offer them for letting her go there was no injury on her ears.



Figure 1. Front View of the Victim

Sex was consented. No resistance was offered thinking that she would be allowed to go. There was therefore nothing unusual in the form of vaginal discharge or seminal stains, on the body or something indicative of her undressing that could raise the suspicion of sexual assault in her at the time of autopsy. It was on this account that no suspicion of rape had been raised or a search set on foot. The probability of her being unconscious, prior to being hanged, due to cerebral hypoxia consequent upon the pressure applied over the areas of carotid vessels in the neck was thus considered.

Killers own confession and unfolding the modalities of the crime went a long way in understanding the mechanism of death. Imagine had the hue and cry over the missing of earrings been not initiated, maintained or had earrings been not recovered what would have been the probability of knowing the reality. The case could have passed off as suicidal hanging. Being a divorcee she would have been thought to be under one or the other kind of compulsion to commit suicide. Her position at the scene of crime was such that she was presumed to have reached the point of suspension. There was hardly anything that made suicidal hanging suspicious. The ligature mark was so faint, ungrooved and incomplete that she was being considered to have hanged from a small height and for too less a period. Had the boys not been caught for possessing those earrings the case would not have taken a turn towards homicide.

They suspended her for two reasons. First they had doubt that she had not died and was still alive. They were so skeptical about her death that even after hanging her, one of them came back to the scene after sometime to make sure that she was really dead. He even pulled her down. Another reason for hanging her, they told, was that they knew by creating a scene of hanging, even if she was noticed no one would suspect them. A divorced young lady in the village would have several

reasons to commit suicide. The practice to kill a victim and then suspend the body from a tree had been reported by Modi[2].

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