

Kashmiri women lift veil in silent awakening

REUTERS, Srinagar, India

Twenty-five-year-old Saima Farhad is a Kashmiri woman who has shunned the veil and set out to discuss dating in a region where cinemas showing Bollywood romances are hard to find and beauty parlours scorned.

But few eyebrows were raised when Farhad and friend Sheeba Masoodi launched "She" -- the first women's magazine in Indian Kashmir, a Muslim majority state where an Islamic revolt against Indian rule since 1989 has killed more than 45,000 people.

The two women epitomise the new face of Kashmiri women who are eager to experiment with some of the social changes sweeping the Indian subcontinent while maintaining their Islamic identity

and values.

"Kashmir is changing," Farhad said one afternoon as she sat on the sprawling lawns of Kashmir University.

"The world thinks Kashmiri women do not have guts and they are very conservative. This is not true. 'She' is an effort to show how talented Kashmiri women are and yes, we also date."

There was a time in Kashmir in the early 1990s when a mere poster on a mosque wall, asking women to wear head-to-toe veils, would be enough to send them scurrying back home.

Barring one theatre in a high-security zone, all cinemas have remained shut since 1989. This May, some cable TV channels were ordered to shut, allegedly by the militants, for spreading "ob-

scenity" in the form of slightly risqué music videos.

And since April, when a prostitution scandal -- in which girls, some of them minors, were said to be supplied to politicians and police officers -- surfaced in the region's summer capital, Srinagar, women avoided beauty parlours after claims they were also involved in the sex trade.

DREAMING BIG
But below the surface, a silent awakening is taking place.

Old taboos are breaking as parents pursue new dreams for their daughters.

"Our religion does not say you can not send your women out," said Mukhtar Ahmad, a Srinagar bank employee.

"My wife is working. My daughter is in a medical college and I want to send her abroad for further studies. Kashmiris are moderate and this moderate society has survived the bloodshed."

A lull in violence compared to the height of the insurgency has also helped women get out of their homes.

In the sun-soaked university

campus, dozens of young girls were seen flocking outside classrooms and walking confidently in colourful clothes. Heads were covered but there were no veils in sight.

"Due to the violence, I think the voice of Kashmiri woman was not heard before," said Dilruba Malik, a 23-year-old student. "But things are changing now. Our voices are becoming louder. Kashmiri women are working alongside men."

The change, however, is not easy and every now and then comes a grim reminder that women in this scenic Himalayan Valley live under the watchful eyes of Islamist militants, who have the power to change their lives.

PROTECTIVE VEIL
Since the sex scandal, allegedly involving top politicians, police and bureaucrats, the streets of Srinagar have seen many protests demanding that Indians leave the Valley.

The protests have often been led by Asiya Andrabi, leader of the Dukhtaran-e-Milat (Daughters of the Muslim Faith), a women's separatist group.

REUTERS, Havana

Cuban President Fidel Castro, who handed over power provisionally to his younger brother after undergoing surgery, has thumbed his nose for four decades at the US government just 90 miles (145 km) away across the Florida Straits.

On the verge of turning 80, the left-wing leader has enjoyed a revival in international support that has allowed him to pull Cuba out of a post-Soviet meltdown and has worked to ensure that the West's sole communist society survives him.

"I'm really happy to reach 80. I never expected it, not least having a neighbour -- the greatest power in the world -- trying to kill me every day," he said on July 21 at a summit of South American presidents in Argentina.

In his old age, Castro has set about trying to grapple with some of Cuba's glaring failures -- decrepit housing, poor transport, power outages and corruption -- while denying his critics a voice. Cheap oil and money from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and credit from China has kept Cuba afloat.

Vilified by opponents as a totalitarian dictator, Castro is admired in many Third World nations for standing up to the United States and providing free education and healthcare.

Oriental Bank

FROM PAGE 1

central bank investigation team and the external auditor," the report said.

The report also informed the committee that the central bank is considering formulation of short-term and long-term plans to save Oriental.

The report said Oriental Bank failed to comply with conditions set by the central bank for carrying out banking activities. Oriental also failed to return deposits to its clients.

The BB took over Oriental to save common depositors and after several steps since the take over the bank is improving with confidence of the clients, the report said.

The central bank also described the situations of three other problem banks to the standing committee members. The three banks are First Security Bank, Bangladesh Commerce Bank, and Social Investment Bank. These problem banks were asked to improve their financial and management situations by the end of this year.

The report said First Security Bank was labelled as a problem bank in 2004 due to poor financial condition and mismanagement, and its capital deficit was Tk 31 crore till March this year. The report, however, observed that there are signs of improvement in the bank's management and financial situation after change of ownership.

In 2004, the BB also listed Bangladesh Commerce Bank as a problem bank due to weak resource management. The bank's capital deficit was Tk 50 crore till March this year. Bangladesh Commerce Bank's improvement is very slow in different sectors, the report said.

According to the report, Social Investment Bank was listed as a problem bank in 2005, and its capital deficit was Tk 66 crore till March this year. The bank has been suffering from a huge load of classified loans that affected its net income.

The BB report told the meeting that the central bank has been monitoring activities of nine other banks under the Early Warning System (EWS) which was initiated in 2004. The banks are Pubali Bank, United Commercial Bank, City Bank, AB Bank, IFIC Bank, National Bank, Shahjalal Bank, Al Arafah Bank and Premier Bank.

Pubali Bank, United Commercial Bank and City Bank have been cleared from the list of problem banks but in accordance with the rules these banks will be under the central bank's EWS monitoring for a year.

Meanwhile, opposition lawmaker Sayedul Haq of Awami League yesterday walked out of the standing committee meeting protesting 'interference by ruling alliance lawmakers which prevented him from raising the issue of government borrowing'.

"BNP and Jamaat members prevented me from raising the issue of government's immense borrowing from the banking sector that has been affecting overall financial management," the AL lawmaker told journalists after the walk out. He also protested absences of both the finance minister and the state minister at the meeting.

Fidel Castro, socialist beacon or ailing despot?



PHOTO: INTERNET

Fidel Castro

He has won friends by sending 20,000 Cuban doctors abroad to treat the poor, mainly in Venezuela, but some as far afield as Pakistan, Indonesia and East Timor. Some 260,000 patients from Latin America and the Caribbean have undergone free eye surgery in Cuba since 2005 in a joint programme with Venezuela.

Castro was greeted by crowds like a rock star in Argentina this month. Anti-globalisation youths see him as a hero, along with revolutionary Che Guevara. "Fidel and Che are symbols of socialist ideals, equality and solidarity, lost in today's capitalist world," said Jose Fierro, a teacher from Latronquiere in Southern France.

"Young people want to believe it is possible," he said, while visiting earlier this month Castro's hide-out atop the Sierra Maestra mountains, from where his guerrillas swept down to overthrow US backed dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Yet, at home critics say Castro has subjected Cuba's 11 million people to collectivised poverty in a police state.

Cubans form lines everyday outside foreign embassies to request visas, but then require government permission to leave. Families lose all their belongings if

they go for good.

Leading dissident Oswaldo Paya says low wages force many to resort to illegal black-market activities to get by and always look over their shoulders to see if they are being overheard, while the ruling party elite is a privileged caste.

"Cubans don't want to live like this anymore," said Paya.

A SURVIVOR

Castro, who says he has survived 600 assassination plots by the CIA and US-based exiles, is the world's third longest-serving head of state after Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej. He turns 80 on August 13.

His pace has slowed and he appears frail since fracturing a knee and an arm in a fall after a speech in October 2004 seen live on television.

But he has still retained the stamina for speeches lasting 3-4 hours, delivered standing, to denounce his foes and micromanage Cuban affairs, often reeling off pages of statistics on every detail of the country's life.

Doubts about his health, first raised when he fainted during a speech in 2001, have stoked speculation about the political deluge that Cuba might face when he is gone.

Castro's designated successor is his younger brother Raul, who is 75 and is thought to lack the charisma that made Fidel an icon and may be the glue that has held his socialist revolution together.

Cuba's relations with Latin America have rarely been so close, despite US efforts to isolate Havana that date back to the Cold War when the whole region except Mexico broke off diplomatic ties and complied with a US trade embargo.

"Cuba feels much stronger. We survived the big crisis of the early 1990s," Ricardo Alarcon, president of Cuba's National Assembly, said earlier this month. "You can say what you like about Cuba, except that it is isolated."

Yet old timers like Mario Bruqueta, who fought with Castro in the Sierra Maestra, worry about the future without their "irreplaceable" leader.

"The Cuban people are more Fidelista than Comunista," he said.

Decomposed body of youth found in Rajshahi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

An unidentified youth was found dead at Upashahar Housing Estate in the city yesterday.

Police recovered the decomposed body inside two rice sacks and sent it to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital Morgue for autopsy after preparing an inquest report.

Hands and legs of the body were tied behind and there were cut marks round its throat. The body was left at an abandoned corner in front of Yunus Ali Memorial School.

Aslam Iqbal, officer-in-charge of Boalia Police Station, said the inquest report suggests that the youth was strangled to death after torture.

An unnatural death case was filed in this regard.