

THE 1995 WESTERN TOURIST KIDNAPPING AND KILLING: UNVEILING THE REPETITIVE NARRATIVE MANIPULATION BY INDIA

By
Maheen Shafeeq
Research Associate
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Dr. Khurram Abbas

May 5, 2025

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On 22 April 2025, 26 people were killed in an attack on tourists in Pahalgam, in Anantnag district of the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).¹ Within minutes of the attack, Indian media outlets began peddling an anti-Pakistan narrative laced with intense war-mongering.² For its part, the Indian government pinned the blame on Pakistan without conducting any investigations into the incident and presenting any credible evidence. Subsequently, New Delhi announced a slew of measures: unilaterally and illegally holding the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 in 'abeyance'; closing Integrated Check Post Attari; cancelling the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme (SVES) and expulsion of Pakistani citizens; annulling the posts of defence advisors at Pakistan High Commission while further reducing the overall strength of the two High Commissions from 55 to 30.³

- 1 Mahwish Hafeez, "Pahalgam Incident: Another False Flag Operation?" *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)*, April 29, 2025, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-pahalgam-incident-another-false-flag-operation/>; "Act of war": What happened in Kashmir attack that killed 26 tourists?," *Aljazeera*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/23/act-of-war-what-happened-in-kashmir-attack-that-killed-26-tourists>
- 2 "Pakistan's General Asim Munir is itching for a fight. Are his soldiers willing?," *The Economic Times*, April 29, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistans-general-asim-munir-is-itching-for-a-fight-are-his-soldiers-willing/articleshow/120736949.cms?from=mdr>
- 3 Ministry of External Affairs India, "Transcript of Special briefing by MEA (April 23, 2025)" press release, April 23, 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/39443/Transcript_of_Special_briefing_by_MEA_April_23_2025

Pakistan firmly rejected the Indian allegations as well as New Delhi's unilateral and illegal step of suspending IWT and announced its own counter-measures, including stopping of all trade with India including to and from any third country through Pakistan, closing of airspace, and further reducing diplomatic presence in the two capitals. Islamabad also stated that it reserved the right to hold bilateral agreements, including the Simla Agreement, in abeyance. Subsequently, while rejecting Indian allegations of Pakistan's involvement in the Pahalgam attack, Islamabad declared its openness to any "neutral and transparent" investigation.⁴

The Indian government's instantaneous blame-game and finger pointing towards Pakistan mirrors a familiar pattern. Historically, the Indian government has used such tragedies as a tool of narrative war to defame Pakistan, which has been exposed by Pakistan repeatedly. The Pahalgam attack, that took place in the Indian occupied region that witnesses unabated human rights abuses and faces draconian laws and oppression by the occupying forces, once again puts in sharp focus India's repetitive narrative manipulation tactics.⁵

1995 Kashmir Hostage Crisis

This is not the first-time that tourists in Pahalgam became entangled in Indian state-orchestrated political crisis. A turning point in the history of occupied Jammu and Kashmir happened on 4 July 1995, when four tourists – two Americans, Donald Hutchings and John Childs; and two Britons, Paul Wells and Keith Mangan were kidnapped while trekking near Pahalgam, and another two that included – one Norwegian, Hans Christian Ostrø; and a German, Dirk Hasert were kidnaped four days later in an separate stance.⁶

One of the American tourists, John Childs, managed to escape after four days on July 8, 1995, into the higher dense jungles, and was rescued by a government chopper that was checking security arrangements for a Hindu pilgrim route.⁷ In search of John Childs, the German tourist Dirk Hasert and the Norwegian tourist Hans Christian Ostrø were kidnapped later on July 8, 1995. Norwegian

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, "Transcript of the Weekly Press Briefing by the Spokesperson, Friday, April 25, 2025" press release, April 25, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-weekly-press-briefing-by-the-spokesperson-friday-april-25-2025>

⁵ Maheen Shafeeq, "The Pahalgam context," *The News International*, May 3, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1307621-the-pahalgam-context>

⁶ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?," *Kafila*, April 6, 2012, <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

⁷ Doreen Carvajal, "American Tricks Captors in Kashmir and Bolts to Freedom," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/10/nyregion/american-tricks-captors-in-kashmir-and-bolts-to-freedom.html>

tourist Hans Christian Ostrø's was later beheaded by the alleged kidnappers and his body was discovered on 13 August 1995 in Shael Dar forest.⁸

Reports maintained that the kidnappers identified themselves as part of a lesser known group, Al-Faran (pseudonym for the group Harkat-ul-Ansar), who demanded the release of 21 persons, including Maulana Masood Azhar, Sajjad Shahid Khan and Nasrullah Mansoor Langrial.⁹ The kidnappers were negotiating the release of tourists with the Crime Branch Chief, Inspector General Rahinder Tikko, who took an inordinately long time despite the critical situation to reduce the demands of the kidnappers, and the two sides ultimately reached a deal three months later on 17 September 1995 to release the tourists for one crore rupees.¹⁰ However, the release could not happen as the news was leaked to the media.

After seventeen years, investigators concluded that the Indian security forces took the Western hostages after the members of the Al-Faran group expressed a willingness to exchange the hostages for money.¹¹ Ultimately, the Western tourists were shot dead by the Indian security forces and their bodies were never found.¹² Although at the time of the kidnapping one American tourist managed to escape, the fate of the remaining hostages was evidently decided by the Indian government's perverse vested interests.¹³

Uncovering the Truth: *The Meadow*

On 12 March 2012, the missing pieces of information were clubbed together by investigative journalists Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clar, who in their book *The Meadow: Kashmir 1995 – Where the Terror Began* explained the intricacies of the prolonged kidnapping. The journalists concluded that the Indian intelligence agencies had the knowledge of the kidnapped tourists' whereabouts, including their photos, but chose to prolong their rescue and release operation.¹⁴

This tactic was adopted by the Indian authorities to internationally highlight the criminal act of the kidnappers having alleged links to Pakistan, and, thereby, wrongfully frame Pakistan. The book

⁸ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?" <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

⁹ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?" <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

¹⁰ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?" <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

¹¹ Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Meadow: Kashmir 1995 – Where the Terror Began* (London: Harper Press, 2012).

¹² Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Meadow*.

¹³ Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Meadow*.

¹⁴ "Wronged Hostages," *Kashmir Life*, April 13, 2012, https://kashmirlife.net/wronged-hostages-2306/#google_vignette

asserts that, “It appeared that there were some in the Indian establishment who did not want this never-ending bad news story of Pakistani cruelty and Kashmiri inhumanity to end, even when the perpetrators themselves were finished.”¹⁵

The Indian government’s actions were further exposed by the claims of the book that “By allowing the hostage crisis to fester, India built its case: Kashmir was not a struggle for freedom but a nest of Islamic terrorism.” The book also dismissed India’s assertions of Pakistan’s involvement. It explicitly stated: “The kidnappers were not from Pakistan, nor were they mujahideen, they were ex-militants working with the Indian forces.” The links of the kidnappers with the Indian government and its mal-intention were not only supported by *The Meadow*, rather human rights reports as well.

Human Rights Documents and Findings

There were key indications that the Indian government could have handled the situation more maturely and worked towards the release of the tourists sooner if it intended to. However, New Delhi’s intentions to use the kidnappings for political benefit were disclosed within three months (by October 1995) of the kidnapping, highlighted by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report published after a year (May 1996) of the abduction when the Western tourists were still assumed to be in captivity.¹⁶ The HRW report disclosed that Indian authorities had systematically used irregular militias, who were subcontracted, to pursue abusive tactics, including kidnapping foreigners and holding them as political hostages, with no official accountability.

The HRW report revealed that, often times, these groups operated on the direction of Indian security forces. It particularly described the 1995 kidnapping incident to underline that New Delhi’s credibility in handling the situation was seriously damaged as foreign diplomats, Western investigation agencies, and families of the victims also claimed that the Indian government was censoring information that was exchanged between them and the kidnappers.¹⁷ After years of the incident, no accountability measures were taken by the Indian government to bring to justice those responsible for killing Western tourists.

The International People’s Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-Administered Kashmir (IPTK), together with The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons, sent a letter to the Jammu and Kashmir State Human Rights Commission on April 6, 2012, which elaborated the details of the

¹⁵ Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Meadow*; Sanjay Kak, “The Dogs Of War,” Caravan Magazine, June 1, 2012, <https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-essays/dogs-war>

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *India’s Secret Army in Kashmir: New Patterns of Abuse Emerge in the Conflict*, -, 1 May 1996, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/1996/en/32217>

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *India’s Secret Army in Kashmir: New Patterns of Abuse Emerge in the Conflict*, -, 1 May 1996, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/hrw/1996/en/32217>

kidnapping and put out a set of recommendations to ensure accountability in the 1995 kidnapping and killing of foreign tourists in Kashmir.¹⁸ They demanded the public release of the Crime Branch's investigation findings and clarification on whether a final report was ever submitted to the court, and if not, who obstructed it. They urged the authorities to explain why no preventive measures were taken to halt trekking in Pahalgam despite the initial abductions.

Further scrutiny is called for into extrajudicial killings carried out in December 1995 and February 1996, as well as into the operations of the government-backed militia.¹⁹ Additionally, it was proposed that the burial sites of the murdered tourists be identified and forensically examined. Finally, a comprehensive investigation into institutional failure and cover-ups was demanded, including action against individuals at the highest levels of government, army, and police. None of these requests have been addressed by the Indian government. This is likely because it exposes the Indian government's role in the kidnappings.

Key Questions

Serious concerns persist that point to the role of Indian government authorities in the 1995 killings of Western tourists. From the moment American tourist John Childs escaped captivity and was rescued by Indian government chopper flying over the area, why did John Childs not assist in locating the other hostages? More confusing is why he was flown back to the United States within just two days? Was this intended to prevent him from offering critical information? Furthermore, why didn't the Indian government helicopter team conduct a full reconnaissance of the area to locate the remaining captives? A coordinated combing operation at that stage might have saved lives. However, it appears that the Indian government's vested interests prevailed – notwithstanding the extensive diplomatic efforts as well as covert military operations by special forces from the United States, Britain and Germany.

Adding to the suspicion is the Indian government's negotiation strategy. Why were officials using stalling tactics despite foreign tourists being in mortal danger? If the main demand was the release of Masood Azhar, jailed at the time, why was that demand denied in 1995, only for him to be

¹⁸ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?" <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

¹⁹ Shivam Vij, "Who Killed Four Foreign Tourists In Kashmir In 1995?" <https://kafila.online/2012/04/06/who-killed-four-foreign-tourists-in-kashmir-in-1995/>

released four years later²⁰ following the Indian Airlines IC-814 hijacking? Does all this suggest that lives of foreign tourists abducted in Kashmir had less value for the Indian government?

Concluding the incident, *The Meadow* cites an eyewitness account who claimed that on Christmas Eve 1995, the four remaining hostages were taken into deep snow, shot, and buried. The book suggested the hostages had become aware of Indian authorities' possible complicity in the abduction. Letting them live could have exposed this. The book notes: "There was only one end for them, and we all knew it." It adds, "No one could risk the hostages being released and complaining of collusion, having seen uniforms and STF jeeps"²¹ (STF referring to the Special Task Force of the Jammu and Kashmir Police). This illustrates that Indian authorities were involved in the kidnappings.

Conclusion

In light of available evidence, eyewitness accounts, and Indian and international human rights organizations reports, the conclusion is inescapable that Indian authorities were fully aware of the kidnapped tourists' whereabouts²² but deliberately chose to linger on the hostage crisis to pin the blame on Pakistan for strategic gains. The Indian government negotiators' inability to locate the kidnappers, the delay tactics employed by them in conducting prompt negotiations, combined with the unexplained early repatriation of the only rescued hostage, point to a well-considered strategy of prolonging the crisis to serve a broader political objective, which was to malign Pakistan on the international stage and discredit the Kashmiri freedom struggle.

This repetitive pattern of exploiting tragedies to advance political and strategic goals and building anti-Pakistan narrative is not new. It is also reflected in India's handling of the most recent Pahalgam attack, where, once again, the focus of the Indian government and media has been on blaming Pakistan without any worthwhile investigations. Such tactics reveal on the one hand, an unconscionable manipulation, and on the other hand, a callous disregard for regional stability through dangerous war-mongering in a nuclearized environment in South Asia.

²⁰ "Releasing Masood Azhar in 1999 was embarrassing for India: Former J&K top cop," *India Today*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/jammu-and-kashmir-ic-814-hijack-kandahar-netflix-former-dgp-sp-vaid-hostage-terrorists-masood-azhar-2592823-2024-09-03>

²¹ Heather Timmons, In 'The Meadow,' a Chilling Alternate View of the 1995 Kashmiri Kidnappings," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2012, <https://archive.nytimes.com/india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/13/in-the-meadow-a-chilling-alternate-view-of-the-1995-kashmiri-kidnappings/>

²² Wronged Hostages," *Kashmir Life*.