

Arrested J&K cop was ‘undercover agent’ who planted SIMs used by 26/11 attackers

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New Delhi : Among the four policemen picked up by the Jammu & Kashmir Police for alleged links with militants is a man who as an “undercover agent” earlier “provided SIM cards to the Lashkar-e-Toiba, which were subsequently used by the militants involved in the 26/11 Mumbai attacks”.

However, police now suspect that Mukhtar Ahmad Sheikh — as well as the three other policemen arrested with him — has switched loyalties, and has instead started helping militants recently.

As reported first by The Indian Express on June 16, the police have registered a case and are interrogating these men after their names cropped up in the investigation into an aborted bid to assassinate a former Hizbul Mujahideen commander in Srinagar city recently.

The story of Mukhtar Ahmad Sheikh belongs to the murky world of counter-insurgency, in which the police have been infiltrating militant ranks with their moles to gather intelligence.

Sheikh, a resident of Rang Parestan in Rainawari, Srinagar, was made a ‘follower’ in the police after his brother — who the police considered a “valuable source” — was killed by militants. Before joining the police, Sheikh drove an autorickshaw in Kolkata.

Sheikh was soon promoted to the rank of constable for “exemplary work” in counter-insurgency. Sources said that he had worked with four top police officers, and played key roles in several major operations against militants.

After 26/11, the trail of SIM cards recovered from the militants killed in Mumbai led to Sheikh’s dramatic arrest in Delhi in December 2008.

As reported by The Indian Express on December 7 and 8, 2008, Sheikh had been on an undercover mission to infiltrate the Lashkar, and had successfully planted 22 SIM cards in the organisation — a few of which were used by the militants involved in the 26/11 attacks.

Information about these SIM cards, J&K Police had said, had been provided to the “concerned authorities” for keeping a watch three months prior to the Mumbai attacks.

Sheikh was released soon — especially after J&K Police protested, saying that his arrest had blown the lid off an “important undercover operation”.

Subsequently, Sheikh returned to Srinagar and resumed his job as a police constable. Like two others among the arrested policemen, he was posted with the J&K

Police's intelligence wing when he was picked up. The fourth man was with the district police in Srinagar.

How were the alleged rogue policemen detected?

Senior Superintendent of Police, Srinagar, Syed Ashiq Hussain Bukhari told The Indian Express that the police were investigating the recent attack on former militant Shabnum when they developed suspicion about the role of a policeman.

"We found some evidence that linked the attack to a militant named Shabir of Hayan in Tral. During investigations, we found that police constable Abbas had been in touch with Shabir. We picked him up and recovered a paper with an IED-making formula from him," Bukhari said.

"We interrogated him and he told us about the involvement of other policemen. Subsequently, we arrested three other policemen, Riyaz, Mukhtar and Ilyas," he said.

Bukhari said that in active counter-insurgency situations, risks of agents going rogue always existed. "When (the then) minister of state for home Mushtaq Lone was killed (in 2002), I cracked the case. An SHO who was the main accused was dismissed from service. The munshi of the thana was the kingpin in that attack," the SSP said.

Bukhari declined to divulge further details because "investigation was still going on".

When contacted, Director General of J&K Police K Rajindra Kumar told The Indian Express that the police had identified the men against whom there was some adverse information. Asked about the level of involvement of the four arrested policemen, he said, "We are conducting a thorough investigation. We were suspicious about the conduct of these men and we have arrested them. We do not want to hamper our investigation. We need to collect all the evidence and it will take some time."

He added, "We spotted it, and our people are capable enough to probe it."

Asked whether central agencies would be allowed to question the men, he said, "We have no problems with that." J&K Police on Sunday evening issued a statement saying they had decided to involve central agencies in the probe.