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Holy row in Kashmir over 'Jesus tomb'

By Haroon Mirani

SRINAGAR - When a popular travel guide revived a decades-old debate by saying that a tomb in Indian-administered Kashmir may be the final resting place of Jesus Christ, the influx of foreign tourists and conspiracy theorists did not go down well with local Muslims - they insist the grave contains the remains of an ancient Sufi saint.

Lonely Planet took pains to add a disclaimer when it described the "Jesus tomb" in its latest edition for India, but this didn't stop curious foreigners flocking to the Roza Bal Shrine in downtown Srinagar, Indian-administered Kashmir's summer capital. Muslim youths responded by roughing up their tour guides.

The tomb's caretakers say it has two graves, both containing

Muslim saints. The most recent, Syed Naseerudin, was a Medieval saint whose life is fairly well documented - it's the grave's earlier inhabitant that has drawn all the attention.

Yuz Asaf was reportedly a charismatic preacher who arrived in Kashmir from Israel with his mother, Mary, in 30AD. In Kashmir his name means "the healer" or "the shepherd, the one who teaches others". His nickname, "Issa", is the local name for Jesus Christ.

The idea that Jesus survived the crucifixion and traveled to Kashmir with his mother or wife has been around for over a 100 years, and popular novels like Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* have renewed public interest in alternative versions of Biblical history.

"The tomb's history was recorded from 112 AD, much earlier than the advent of Islam and around the same time Jesus Christ lived," said Suzanne Olsson, the New York-based researcher and author of *Jesus in India, The Lost Tomb*. "There is no question of the tomb containing any Muslim saint."

But both Christians and Muslims dismiss the idea as blasphemy. Both religions say Jesus Christ was taken by God into heaven, while some Islamic and Christian sects say there will be a "second coming" of Jesus Christ.

"Yuz Asaf and Syed Naseerudin are buried here and both are Muslims," Mohammed Amin Ringshawl, the caretaker of the small tomb, which is surrounded by a nondescript, one-storey

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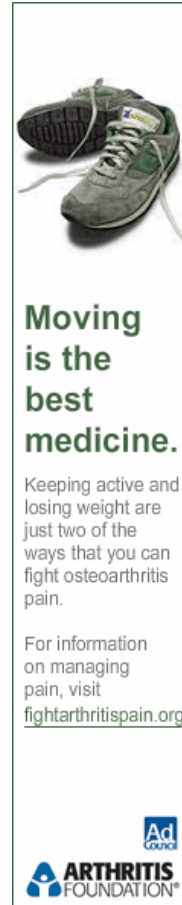
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shrine, told Asia Times Online.

Louis Jacolliot, a French barrister, colonial judge, author and lecturer is credited with first propounding the theory that Jesus spent time in India. His book, *La Bible dans l'Inde, ou la Vie de Iezeus Christna (The Bible in India or The life of Iezeus Christna)*, was first published in 1869.

There is no record of Christ's life between the ages 12 to 30 in the New Testament, and researchers have been trying to piece together the era known as "the missing years" for centuries.

In 1890, Russian author Nicolas Notovitch published *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, which referred to Buddhist scrolls found in a monastery in the Ladakh region of Indian-administered Kashmir. The scrolls, according to Notovitch, described Jesus as coming to India and living and studying Buddhism there in the "missing years".

The controversial Ahmadiyya sect, which believes that Jesus was a mortal who died a natural death in India, has released numerous books on the theory. Most famous is *Jesus in Heaven on Earth*, written by Khawaja Nazir Ahmad in 1952.

Aziz Kashmiri, a local journalist, co-wrote a book in 1973 with professor Fida Hassnain that claimed Jesus died in Kashmir at the ripe old age of 120. Hassnain, a former director of Archives, Archaeology, Research and Museums for Jammu and Kashmir, also co-authored a book with Olsson entitled *Roza Bal, Beyond the Da Vinci Code*.

Alongside the dozens of factual books published on the matter, the heavily researched thriller *The Rozabal Line*, by Ashwin Sanghi was published in 2007.

Authors who claim Christ is entombed in Roza Bal say the evidence is conclusive.

"At Roza Bal tomb the sarcophagus is laid in an east-west direction, in line with Jewish traditions, rather than the Muslim tradition of north-south," said Olsson. The researcher added that the sarcophagus in Roza Bal was covered with a gravestone laid in a north-south direction to give it a Muslim identity.

At the shrine, the footprints of Yuz Asaf are carved into stone, showing some peculiar injuries. "These can only have been caused only when a nail is pierced through the feet laid one over the other during crucifixion," said Olsson, adding, "There is no history of crucifixion in Asia." A recent documentary by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on the subject used computer graphics to recreate the wounds.

Professor Hassnain claims Jesus chose Kashmir as his destination because Kashmiris and Afghans originate from the "10 missing tribes of Israel". He says the people settled in the new countries after being driven out of Israel by the Assyrians in around 720 BC. "Jesus had come to preach among his own people," according to Hassnain.

Many tribes in Kashmir call themselves "Bani Israel" (children of Israel). Local tour operators say Jesus passed through the famous tourist spot Yus-Marg (Meadow of Jesus), a beautiful valley, during his journey into Kashmir.

"On his way [to Kashmir] the mother Mary passed away in [what is now] Pakistan and a shrine was built there at present-day Murree [derived from Mary]," said Olsson. She says the connection between Kashmir and Jewish traditions is strengthened by the presence of graves of the Prophet Moses and his brother Aaron at Bandipora and Harwan in Kashmir.

"The grave of Moses is also in the Jewish tradition of east-west. There are many more similarities between Kashmiris and the Middle East socially and culturally," said Olsson.

A former caretaker of the Roza Bal shrine, the late Basharat Saleem, claimed to possess a family chart that proved he was a direct descendant of Yuz Asaf. The word Roza Bal is derived from the Kashmir term Rauza-Bal, meaning "tomb of the prophet".

Olsson say she hopes DNA testing would yield a major breakthrough in her theory. Olsson, who claims to be the 59th descendant of Jesus Christ, plans to return to Kashmir soon to obtain permission from the authorities to conduct a DNA test at the Roza Bal shrine. Given the shrine's sensitive nature, this is highly unlikely.

Locals vehemently oppose the testing, saying it would be a

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Olsson vehemently opposed the testing, saying it would be a desecration of the shrine. Olsson's DNA project is not just limited to Roza Bal, she is working on other related graves, particularly at Murree, where she reportedly enjoys the government's support.

"The Islamic republic of Pakistan has been most cooperative," said Olsson. "Famous Pakistani archaeologist, the late Dr Ahmad Dani, was the lead archaeologist for this project."

She said a Pakistan television channel's offices had been built above the site, making the exact grave site difficult to find. "We

could be able to locate it with ground-penetrating radar, but we will need the help of the army," said Olsson. She added that another major challenge was finding the US\$40,000 needed to fund the DNA tests, which are to be carried out at Oxford University in England.

Olsson said the Roza Bal test would be part of a large, ambitious project called "The DNA of God", which would study seven grave sites in Pakistan, Kashmir and Tibet.

If the project ever does make it to Kashmir, it is likely to have a heated reception. "These crazy researchers and some Ahmadiyya sect academicians are just spreading lies by saying that Yuz Asaf in reality is Jesus Christ, which we are not going to tolerate," said a youth who lives near the shrine.

Sitting on an uneasy calm after a 20-year-long anti-India insurgency, the Jammu and Kashmir government is also unlikely to sanction anything that could spark religious violence. And the tomb's caretaker, Ringshawl, told Reuters in late April that the shrine was now officially closed after Olsson allegedly tried to break in to carry out a DNA test.

"The foreigners are hurting Muslim sentiments, so to avoid any trouble we have locked the sanctum sanatorium," he said.

Haroon Mirani is a Kashmir-based journalist

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