
CASE REPORT**Death of a farm worker in a paddy field: A rare suspicious death investigation report**

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Abstract

The examination of crime scenes, in particular, death scenes requires knowledge, keen observation, aptitude and presence of mind to find out the truth. There are incidences wherein a death scene appeared homicide, but in reality, it may be suicide since the body posture may confuse to explain. The corresponding author, also then forensic crime scene investigator/ field criminalist (herein as TN) visited a suspicious death scene wherein a farming worker was found dead in a paddy field. The first officer from the police station arrived and guarded the scene and the family members of the deceased alleged murder and sought justice and to arrest the accused. The police inspector also visited the scene, registered a case under suspicious death and requisitioned the forensic service. The field criminalist immediately arrived at the scene and on a thorough examination of the scene, he ruled out the possibility of homicide. The body was found on the stagnated watery clay field and the dress worn was found intact. Interestingly, the author noticed no other injuries except a linear charred mark on the buttock and back of the body. Around the paddy crops, barbed fencing wire was found laid along the bund and also, he noticed some dead rodents in bunding areas. On complete analysis of the scene and reconstruction, the author, also the forensic crime scene investigator opined that the cause of death was due to electrocution from illegal electric fencing constructed by the land owner and ruled out the possibility of homicide, thus solved the mystery.

Keywords: Suspicious Death, Alleged Homicide, Electrocution

Introduction

Forensic crime scene investigators are facing challenges in the crime scenes to locate the evidence since the crime scenes are usually damaged by the family members, villagers and onlookers [1]. The crime scene may be either indoor or outdoor and again outdoor crime scenes with dead bodies would cause multiple challenges to the investigators since outdoors is more vulnerable to loss, and deleterious change of physical evidence [2]. One of the initial tasks in such a crime scene is to determine whether a crime has been committed at the death scene itself, i.e., whether is it a primary crime scene, wherein the

majority of physical evidence is found at the scene [3]. Again, natural disasters like floods, drought, lightning and some diseases may also create confusion to arrive at the cause of death [4]. Suspicious death is more than traditional foul play suspected in which the circumstances of death strongly suggest murder [5]. If the crime investigator did not recognize the physical evidence and interprets it improperly, the value of the physical evidence may be reduced or even lost. Some investigators underestimated the value of physical evidence and neglected the evidence in the initial stage of the investigation process [6].

The author presents his crime scene investigation of a suspicious death case, as investigated during his forensic career in India.

The gist of the case and crime scene observation

It was alleged that a farm worker aged 34 year, who used to go to the paddy field regularly for work in the early morning, was found dead in a paddy field of a landlord. The first officer arrived and guarded the scene and the family members of the deceased have alleged murder and sought the arrest of the accused. The inspector of police arrived and a case was registered under suspicious death and requisitioned the forensic service. On arrival, the forensic crime scene investigator (TN) examined the scene and the dead body of the farm worker as shown in fig. 1. The rice paddy field had dividing mud walls (bund) with the rice paddy crop was ready for harvest. The body was found on a water-stagnated clay field without crop and his face

facing the sky with the back, rest on the ground near the bund of the adjacent crop field. A shovel/spade is used for forming work found near the leg. He wore half trouser with a striped designed shirt with left-hand rest on the abdomen. The author noticed a black holy thread tied around the right wrist and a metal ring on the left ring finger. A red colour towel was found tied on the head with the mouth and eyes found closed. On examining the field, interestingly three rodents were found dead in different bund areas. Around the paddy field, barbed wire was laid as a fence. The author observed the dead body externally by removing the dresses and noticed no injuries, except linear charred marks running diagonally on the right side of the back and left side of the buttock, as shown in fig. 2. Near the paddy field, a concrete pole was found for the power supply and fitted with a metal box at a height of about 5 feet and with two fuse carriers inside the box for the power supply.



Figure 1: Dead body of the farm worker on the clay land



Figure 2: Linear charred mark on buttock and back of the deceased

Crime reconstruction

Forensic science starts from the crime scene and locating physical evidence is the primary goal of any investigation. A death investigation in outdoor scenes is the art to examine the scene and deceased with an open mind to find out the linking evidence or unusual circumstances that may indicate the death of a person. Before starting the scene investigation, the author had inquired about the landlord of the paddy field, other workers and also family members. After keen observation of the paddy field area and the deceased, the author reconstructed the event as follows: It is learnt that the farm worker used to come to the farm every day in the early morning around 5 am to start his

routine work and try to complete the morning work before hot sun. Since the rice paddy crop was ready to harvest, no wonder rodents and animals enter, eat and damage the crop. Intending to protect the crop, the landlord might have given power supply to the barbed wire fence around the crop area from the lamp pole illegally without the knowledge of the farm worker. He might have switched on the power when the farming work was completed in the late evening and switched off the power in the early morning before the arrival of the worker.

On the day of this incident, the owner might have forgotten to switch off the power supply to the wire

fence and as usual, the farm worker come in the early morning, still it was dark without light. He might have been contacted with a live wire in the dark early dawn and suffered an electric shock from a live barbed wire fence and fallen to instant death. This fact was indicated by the presence of linear charred wire marks from the barbed wire fence on the buttock and back as shown in the fig. 2. The dresses were found intact including the red towel around the head. In earlier days, villagers used to carry a towel on their shoulders for their multipurpose use whenever leave their homes. Interestingly the author noticed some dead rodents found on the bunds near the barbed wire fence. It is also evidence of electrocution death of the animals. Based on the crime reconstruction, police officers interrogated the landowner further, who then accepted his illegal construction of an electric fence without the knowledge of the farm worker. The body was then sent to the Department of Forensic Medicine for autopsy examination, and the autopsy experts confirmed the crime scene findings. Based on the scientific evidence, the landlord was arrested and during the trial, the author presented his testimony before the judge finally, the case ended with a conviction.

Discussion

A study was conducted in India on different facets of electrocution deaths for a period of five years (2012 to 2016) and the result showed that the majority of the victims were men (86%) aged between 21 and 40 years [7]. In the finding of the present case report, the victim was a male, aged 34 years shown within the above range. In a similar electrical fatality study, the authors have shown that ninety-four per cent of the workers were performing their usual tasks at the time of their

death and the greatest number of deaths occurred on farms and non-construction industrial sites [8]. The present study accepted this finding that death occurred on farms in his usual tasks. Sachil Kumar conducted a study in northern India and reported that out of 83 deaths, 71 investigated were accidental and the rest were suicidal [9]. Accordingly in the present case report, the death was accidental and not suicidal. Thus, electrocution is an uncommon cause of death and occurs commonly due to an accident and mostly in the work area. Electric fences are one of the most popular intrusion detection tools used across the world, especially in industrial areas and large farms. But in the present case report, the owner of the farming land provided an illegal power supply to the fence, even without the knowledge of his farming worker and was considered an offence that led to a sentence in court.

Conclusion

In the present forensic crime scene investigation report, the author solved the mystery of alleged homicide, as a confirmed electrocution death, caused by the owner of the farming land. During the trial, the Honourable Judge appreciated the value of scientific evidence presented in the court and ended with a conviction for the concerned.

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