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Who killed Asha Goel?

More than 100 days after the Ontario obstetrician's vicious murder in India, her killers have yet to be caught

By Jenny Manzer

TORONTO – Sanjay Goel used to rise at 4:45 a.m., Vancouver time, to telephone his mother, Dr. Asha Goel, before they would each start their working days—he, as president of a cruise travel company, she as a devoted obstetrician at Headwaters Health Care Centre in Orangeville, Ont.

That morning ritual ended forever on Aug. 23, when Asha Goel was found lying in a pool of her own blood on the 14th floor of a high-rise in Mumbai, India. Now, more than three months later, Sanjay, his two sisters, and their father surgeon Dr. S.K. Goel still wonder how a woman who brought thousands of lives into the world could have her own end so brutally.

"I say to people that she was the centre of my world, the centre of my universe," said Sanjay, speaking from a hotel room in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) where he was on a third trip to try and galvanize the investigation. "I'm here to assist the police in any way," said Sanjay.

Asha Goel, 62, was found on that August morning in her brother Suresh Chandra Agarwal's apartment, located in the city's posh Malabar Hill area. She had been struck on the head, stabbed repeatedly, blinded and her jaw broken. There were 21 different points of injury on her body, according to Sanjay.

There had been five other people sleeping in the apartment that night—Agarwal, his wife, a nurse, a cook and a house boy—none of whom reported hearing anything. There were no signs of forced entry. A few items were missing from the apartment: an artificial diamond ring, a small sum in rupees, a camera and a necklace worth about \$100, said Sanjay, estimating the items to be collectively worth no more than \$1,500.

Asha Goel had travelled to Mumbai to visit Agarwal, who was in ill health. She was scheduled to return home early on the Aug. 24. Sanjay had accompanied her on the trip, but flew back to Canada on Aug. 18.

Confession recanted

About a week after the killing, Pradeep Parab, who managed a guest house owned by the family, confessed to having a role in the murder, alleging that his employer, Agarwal, had put him up to it—a claim made suspicious by the fact Agarwal was dying.

Parab was arrested on Sept. 2.

Indian law requires that confessions be made in the presence of a magistrate, rather than while a suspect is in custody. After several court appearances, Parab eventually recanted his confession. A lie detector test indicated Parab was lying when he protested his innocence, but that in itself was not solid evidence, said Sanjay.

The investigation was hindered from the start, since the crime scene was not properly sealed and was "badly managed," contended Sanjay. He has had to adjust to investigation procedures in India, which differ from the Western-style direct inquiry, and to different forensic standards.

"I live in the land of laptops and white boards," mused Sanjay, president of Cruise Connections Canada.

The possibility the killing was connected to an inheritance dispute between Asha Goel's three brothers is one line of investigation being pursued by Mumbai Police. She had apparently taken a stand in an ongoing feud involving division of property between the brothers, imploring them to be fair and start acting like family.

Asha Goel was a strong woman, physically and spiritually, and was the only member of her immediate family to go on to postgraduate education, said Sanjay. Her word carried considerable weight, and she was often called upon for advice. "She was a person people turned to. She played a leading or pivotal role in facing family issues."

A Mumbai newspaper reported the contested property to be worth more than \$1.4 million.

While the inheritance dispute theory is still a question mark, Sanjay said his family is struggling with the possibility that one of their relatives could be involved.

"The harsh reality is that we don't know what to think. No one wants to believe that such a thing could ever happen in their family at all."

In November, Agarwal, the eldest of the brothers, died of renal failure. Earlier this month, Parab was granted access to bail, but under Indian constitution had to provide two "sureties" to vouch for him and be willing to pay his bail. As of the second week of December, he had not produced these individuals, and was still in custody.

In recent months Sanjay, his sisters and father, have travelled to Mumbai in attempts to keep a flame under the investigation.

While Sanjay said he does not believe his mother was targeted because of her nationality, he said the possibility that there is a Canadian connection to the conspiracy is being investigated.

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Last month, the family posted a reward of one million Indian rupees, close to \$30,000, for any information that might assist police. They also created a Web site (www.ashagoel.ca) and an e-mail address (tips@ashagoel.ca) to accept anonymous tips. The family has been placing ads in Mumbai newspapers—if only to keep police motivated, said Sanjay.

While these initiatives did not produce an onslaught of tips, it has helped drive the investigation. In the last week of November, a fresh police investigation team of five officers was assigned to the case.

Naval Bajaj, a deputy commissioner of police in Mumbai, confirmed they are investigating both the possibility that the crime involved more than a simple robbery, and that it may be related to the inheritance dispute. He declined to say whether a Canadian connection to the crime is being considered.

"These are the details of the investigation, so we would not like to divulge," he said, speaking from a Mumbai police station. "We are investigating all aspects of the case." Bajaj said he is still "very much" hopeful that they will solve the crime.

Meanwhile, Canadian foreign affairs officials say they're keeping in close contact with local authorities to ensure the investigation keeps rolling. "Homicides are not solved as fast as everyone would hope, especially the family," said Reynald Doiron, a spokesman for the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa.

"In terms of competence, in terms of determination, in terms of interest, yes, we have confidence in the Indian police," he said, adding there is also an RCMP attaché in Delhi whose members are working with local forces.

"The Canadian government faces a difficult balancing act between maintaining long-term cordial relations with India and the need to help find justice for a Canadian who was very important in Canadian society," commented Sanjay. "I think foreign affairs is trying to walk a very difficult line."

Teenage years

Asha Goel grew up in Mathura, India, and spent her teenage years in Mumbai. She graduated from Topiwala National Medical College in Mumbai, and the family has set up a generous scholarship there in her name. The full scholarship will go to a deserving female student each year, and is designed to be self-funding in perpetuity.

Medicine is a cornerstone for the Goel family, which boasts 22 doctors. Asha Goel was chief obstetrician at Headwaters, where her husband is on staff as a surgeon. A particularly active obstetrician, Sanjay estimated his mother delivered more than 10,000 babies over her career. She also played a vital role in providing care to immigrant women in nearby Brampton. "Many of the patients she saw had not been to an obstetrician in many years."

Sanjay said he misses those morning conversations with his mother. Growing up,

when she would ask who he was going to marry, he'd reply: "Well Mum, I'm going to marry you," he said, joking that at age 39, he is still unmarried.

"We're concerned that 100 days have now passed," he said, speaking in early December.

Sanjay plans to return to Mumbai again at month's end, and then every three to four weeks—until he gets answers.

"I am the only son," said Sanjay, who is used to the rigours of international travel. He now wishes he had listened to his mother and learned passable Hindi, so he could better communicate with investigators. When in Mumbai, he has two security details—a bodyguard and someone to guard his hotel room—around the clock.

"Was this an ordinary robbery?" he asked. "It's simply not possible."

He said he finds it strange, given his mother's contributions, that the case hasn't garnered more attention. There were 500 chairs set up for her memorial service in Canada, he recalled, and there still weren't enough.

"I think it's important for all Canadians that people find the truth out about this matter, no matter how ugly it might be," he said.

"We as a family are also of that mind. No matter how ugly it might be, we need to find out the truth."

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