



WHY WAS SHIVANI KILLED?



BIRTH OF MYSTERY: The case awaits resolution since 1999

Three years after she was murdered, a Delhi journalist's tragedy nears its finale. The clues point to an influential police officer. But in the dock is the capital's power society.

■ by Sayantan CHAKRAVARTY

ON SEPTEMBER 9, RAVI Kant Sharma will turn 50. A day that should have been a milestone will be spent behind bars—if Delhi Police get to him by then—or on the run. Either way it will be an unlikely celebration for the disgraced Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, one who has spent 26 years in service, lobbying his way from one prized posting to another.

Today, the man who a junior officer in Haryana describes as a combination of "low profile and high ambition" is a fugitive, with a prize of Rs 50,000 for information leading to his arrest. He has lost his job as Haryana's IC (Pris-

ons). His patrons—from former prime minister I.K. Gujral to former Haryana Police chief S.P.S. Rathore, himself accused in a molestation case—can do little to save him. Only wife Madhu and daughters Komal and Pragati put up a valiant, almost daily primetime show before TV cameras, defending him, buying time, preventing the immediate, postponing the inevitable.

It has been three and a half years but nemesis has caught up with Sharma. The ghost of Shivani Bhatnagar, a woman they say he wooed and indulged, used and was used by, has come to haunt him. No Greek tragedy could have been more dramatic, no crime chase more ironic. Sharma, once a feared lawman, is now the subject of salacious gossip and

snide ridicule, the newest national embodiment of scandal.

Sharma has been accused by the police of masterminding the January 23, 1999 murder of Shivani, then a correspondent with *The Indian Express* in Delhi. Madhu, in turn, has charged—with an ambiguous subsequent half-retraction—that Union Communications Minister Pramod Mahajan, the rising star of the BJP, had an affair with Shivani and then organised her murder. Seen as a clever, street-smart politician, Mahajan has certainly encountered a public relations problem, even if he says, "Rumour-mongering was always against me. Now I'm relieved it's out."

For the moment, Mahajan's famed managerial skills, which make him a



R.K. SHARMA'S POLITICAL CLOUT

FOR THE GOOD LIFE

SUSPECT NO. 1 in the Shivani murder is a police officer for whom a lame-duck Gujral bent all rules to ensure a top job in Air-India



LUCKY ME: Sharma got prize posts

RAVI KANT SHARMA IS TWICE blessed in the sense that he was born into as well as married into influence. His father, the late IAS officer J.D. Sharma, belonged to a rich, status-conscious family. When young Ravi Kant married Madhu, his Panjab University sweetheart, he made his most significant career move. S.V. Bedi, Madhu's father, was a senior editor at *The Tribune*. Raj Bedi, the mother-in-law, was a noted stage personality. The Bedis, who now live with their son in the US, were close to I.K. Gujral's family. No wonder, to quote a fellow officer in Haryana, "He considered himself a cut above the rest."

Colleagues saw Sharma as a quiet, almost secretive, man who was perennially obsessed with "organising his next posting". One fellow 1976 batch officer recalls him as "inscrutable and not transparent" but paradoxically "very helpful". "This probably explains why he has support in Haryana Police, especially among lower ranks," he adds. Sharma is also described as emotional and prone to crying, a fact co-accused Satya Prakash confirmed to the police: "He used to come to me and break down, saying, 'please help me'." A batch-mate says, "I can't remember him being a violent person. If he is guilty, he must have been under tremendous pressure."

In the late 1980s, Sharma was SP, Gurgaon, when he got his first deputation to the Central Bureau of Investigation. The stint in Delhi worked wonders and, in 1992, he flew to Lyons, France, for a three-year spell at the Interpol headquarters. On July 1, 1995, he returned to his home cadre and, as per rules, should have spent the next three years there. Less than a year later, Gujral became prime minister and sought a position for Sharma. Since there was no PMO vacancy at the level of director, it was decided to appoint Sharma to the prime minister's personal staff. The PMO was in such a tearing hurry that it didn't even inform the Home Ministry—the controlling authority for IPS officers' appointment—but sent a direct wireless message to the Haryana government on June 24, 1997, asking it to relieve Sharma. On July 2, Sharma was in the PMO.

On December 4, 1997, the Gujral government resigned. The next day Sharma wrote to then principal secretary N.N. Vohra, requesting his name be forwarded for appointment as chief vigilance officer (CVO), Air-India. The Department of Personnel was asked to vet the application. On January 20, 1998, it wrote back saying Sharma was too junior. Sharma then requested deputation to the International Drug Control Programme, Vienna. Next, he sought an extension of his PMO stint. It was all to no avail. Luck smiled when, on March 16, his CVO application was revived, but the Civil Aviation Ministry officials objected. One wrote, "It is felt we should consider an officer who has a consistently outstanding record." Yet when the file reached then civil aviation minister C.M. Ibrahim on March 18, he wrote, "R.K. Sharma's record is outstanding." On that very day, the file was sent to the PMO. March 18 was Gujral's last day in office. Sharma's file was probably the last one he signed. Vohra warned him that it was irregular and would require the next prime minister's ratification.

Two days later, Atal Bihari Vajpayee duly obliged his predecessor. Gujral had his way; Sharma had a new job.

—Ramesh Vinayak



T.S. BEDI

I ACCUSE: Madhu shifted the spotlight to Mahajan during her outburst on TV

sort of first among equals in the BJP's second rung, have helped him. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's daughter Namita tied a rakhi on him on August 22. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani rushed to his defence, calling Madhu's charge "malicious". Samajwadi leaders Mulayam Singh Yadav and Amar Singh backed him too. As the man himself put it, "My political, governmental and social activities haven't been affected."

But why has a murder that took place almost four years ago reached a denouement only now? Why is this heady cocktail of power and politics, passion and press possessing all of India? After all, the Sharma angle is not new. A day or two after Shivani was strangled and stabbed in their Delhi apartment (see graphic), Rakesh Bhatnagar, her husband and a journalist at *The Times of India*, was reported to have told friends he suspected one R.K. Sharma.

The Haryana cadre officer—apparently so much a part of Shivani's life that "ravikant" was the password to her e-mail account in *The Indian Express* computer system—was called in for questioning in 1999. He got the better of his interrogators easily.

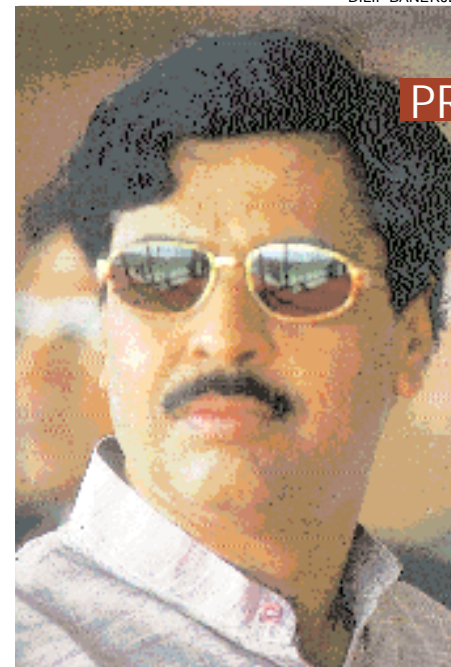
Delhi's then DCP (Crime) Karnal Singh, now posted in Goa, recalls

Sharma's cocky attitude. "He never really cooperated with us," says Delhi Police Commissioner R.S. Gupta. Dropping names, he even skipped the lie-detector test, getting doctors to certify he had a nasal condition.

There were other leads too, marital discord for one. It was widely believed by her friends that Shivani had a relation-

ship with Sharma. She often spoke about it. In the summer of 1998, she went to London on a three-month Chevening journalism scholarship. She took time off to fly back to India at her own expense. When a colleague asked her how she could afford it, she reportedly said, "I have a close friend in Air-India who fixes tickets for me."

DILIP BANERJEE



RED HERRING

PRAMOD MAHAJAN

Madhu Sharma's grave but unsubstantiated charges have grabbed the headlines but have left the flamboyant cabinet minister unfazed. After his categorical denial of the charges, the party's support for him and a clean chit from the police, it is business as usual for Mahajan. He hasn't deviated one bit from his hectic ministerial and political schedule. Nor for that matter has he eased on his social life. On the face of it, the negative publicity has not affected his political standing. However, it has certainly dented his public image and to some extent compromised his earlier position as the frontrunner for the BJP leadership.

THE MADHU SHOW

Madhu Sharma's media outbursts have been timed to gain optimum advantage for her husband.

AUGUST 4: Tells Delhi police R.K. Sharma will soon join the investigations. Next day, he applies for anticipatory bail, unsuccessfully.

AUGUST 8: Accuses Union Home Ministry of framing her husband to protect "a BJP leader".

AUGUST 11: Wants to meet prime minister to discuss "high-level conspiracy". Next day, Sharma is due to rejoin duty. Doesn't.

AUGUST 15: Accuses Mahajan of murder. On August 14 and 16, police remand of two co-accused ends.

AUGUST 21: Demands DNA test on Mahajan to test Shivani's son's paternity. Legally, only Shivani's husband can make such a demand.

Given the implied infidelity, suspect No. 1 in January 1999 was the husband. Not surprisingly, Bhatnagar says he was questioned some 70 times by the police that year: "I didn't even have time to mourn my wife's death. Nor could I spend time with my child."

Somewhere deep in his heart, Bhatnagar believes Sharma used his clout to bury the case. It came up for review when Gupta took charge of the capital's police force this July. By then the police had begun to keep watch on Sri Bhagwan and Satya Prakash (see box). Sri Bhagwan, who later told the police he was Madhu's "foster brother", had been under scrutiny ever since the police, studying Sharma's phone records, had noticed the extraordinary number of exchanges between them over the past three years. It was a fact the Ajai Raj Sharma regime had overlooked. Deciding Shri Bhagwan was "close" to Sharma and likely to know his secrets, Gupta put him under the scanner.

Sharma's alibi was that on the day of the murder he was in Pune. There he had borrowed a cell phone from S. Kuckreja, a Delhi-based businessman with interests in Pune. That afternoon, a little after the time doctors say Shivani was murdered, Kuckreja's cell phone received a call from a Delhi cell phone. It belonged to Sri Bhagwan and its location was traced to the Patparganj zone, in the



Illustrations by NILANJAN DAS

THE FINAL MOMENTS

On January 23, 1999

12.30 p.m. Pradeep Sharma meets Sri Bhagwan and an unknown man at Chhattarpur, Delhi.

2 p.m. They reach Navkunj Apartments. Sri Bhagwan phones to ensure Shivani is alone in the flat.

2.20 p.m. Pradeep and the unknown man buy sweets. Pradeep signs in at the Navkunj gate.

2.25 p.m. Shivani answers the door bell. They say they have an invitation for her husband.

2.35 p.m. Shivani makes them tea. She also makes Pradeep speak to her husband at his office.

2.37 p.m. Suddenly the second man strangulates Shivani. Pradeep stabs her with a kitchen knife.

2.40 p.m. Certain that Shivani is dead, Pradeep picks up her infant boy and throws him on a bed.

2.50 p.m. They ransack the flat, and join Sri Bhagwan waiting near the gate.


FRESH TURN

Jan 1999-July 2002



The case gets early impetus after R.K. Sharma is questioned within three months of the murder. In July 1999, Ajai Raj Sharma takes over as police commissioner of Delhi, and for whatever reasons there is a lull. There are whispers about how R.K. Sharma managed to stall investigations.


Since July 2002




R.S. Gupta takes over as police chief and asks Crime Branch to take a fresh look at the Shivani case. Surveillance is mounted on suspects like Sri Bhagwan. He is questioned in late July, but keeps denying charges for which police say they have evidence. His arrest, followed by those of two others, brings a comatose case back to life.

DELHI POLICE'S THEORY



R.K. Sharma
Most important link, still missing. The IGP wanted Shivani out of the way.




Sri Bhagwan
Relative and confidant of Sharma, asked to hire killers to "finish" Shivani.



Satya Prakash
Sri Bhagwan passed the job of finding would-be killers to him.

Pradeep Sharma
Hired by Prakash. Stabbed Shivani in the throat.



Second Killer
Strangulated Shivani. Who is he?

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

R.K. Sharma, absconding IGP, prime suspect
Would have preferred to become a household name in some better way, but at the moment the IGP has become India's most-wanted criminal.

Madhu Sharma, wife of R.K. Sharma
For two weeks she has been the country's most talked about woman, levelling charges against not just Mahajan but Delhi Police as well.

Pramod Mahajan, Union minister
Accused of having an affair with Shivani by Sharma's wife, Madhu. Mahajan will forever regret his association with the journalist.

Inder Kumar Gujral, former prime minister
He went out of his way to induct Sharma in his personal staff and made bureaucrats huff and puff to get him into Air-India.

Sri Bhagwan, "man who weaved the plot"
A south Delhi property dealer, he was arrested on July 30 from his house in Gurgaon. Pradeep was driven to Shivani's apartment by him.

Satya Prakash, "man who hired the killers"
Approached Pradeep for the job. He was arrested from Faridabad on August 17. Policeman father worked under Sharma as an SHO in Gurgaon.

Pradeep Sharma, "man who stabbed Shivani"
Pradeep, now in jail, was assigned the job of killing Shivani by Satya Prakash. He was arrested from Delhi's Munirka Vihar on August 1.

PANKAJ NANGIA/TODAY



PANKAJ NANGIA/TODAY



THE EXECUTORS: The police say Sri Bhagwan (top) was the conduit to Sharma and drove the getaway car, while property dealer Satya Prakash (below, right) recruited the killers

vicinity of Navkunj Apartments where the Bhatnagars stayed.

Sri Bhagwan's lines were tapped, his conversations listened in on. Three years had passed. Tongues loosened with time. U.K. Katna, joint commissioner (crime), Delhi, says, "We found that the links of the prime suspect and other accused were common." Police sources say they picked up definitive clues while monitoring Sri Bhagwan's conversations with Satya Prakash, son of a policeman who once worked under Sharma. The first was arrested on July 30, the second on August 17. In between, on August 1, the police brought in Pradeep Sharma, said to have stabbed Shivani (see box).

By now, the Delhi policemen had enough to want another meeting with

Sharma. On August 2, at 5 a.m., a Delhi Crime Branch team reached Panchkula, near Chandigarh. In keeping with protocol, the visitors sought the assistance of local policemen, who inexplicably delayed the operation by two hours.

The joint Haryana-Delhi team descended on Sharma's residence at 7 a.m. Ten minutes earlier, the man had escaped in his Ford Ikon. "We don't know who tipped off Sharma," admits Gupta, "but for sure he was." The police are searching for him all over Haryana. Even Chief Minister O.P. Chautala has called upon him to surrender. Sharma is variously described as hiding at a farmhouse in Gurgaon or in one of the many jail complexes he lorded over as ICG (Prisons).

Familiar with the law and police procedure, Sharma apparently wants to

NIGGLING QUERIES

■ The killers enter Shivani's flat unarmed, hoping to find murder weapons. One of them discovers a piece of yellow wire, another a kitchen knife. Curious isn't it?

■ The killers meet at one point, drive down together, they commit the crime together and drive away together. Yet they are never introduced to each other. Why?

■ For three and a half years the case is near buried, though R.K. Sharma has been questioned in early 1999. Did someone soft-pedal the probe? Why the hurry now?

give himself up after those arrested have completed their maximum 14 days in police remand and have been handed over to judicial custody. The last to be arrested, Satya Prakash, has been sent to police remand till August 28. Sharma, lawyers say, doesn't want to be confronted by his "co-conspirators" while they are being held by the police. He also wants the police to reveal all they know. That will make his defence easier. Having been refused anticipatory bail by lower courts in Delhi and Haryana, Sharma has now moved the Delhi High Court. It will hear the case on August 26.

ALL this doesn't help Mahajan, who has been charged by Madhu of having an affair with Shivani. As a diversionary tactic it has been brilliant. Mahajan can only protest, "I have really nothing to say against the allegations. A lady who says I spoke to Shivani for 45 minutes on the day of the murder must have some shred of evidence. Does she?"

The police dismiss Madhu's outburst. "We will not look into the relationship of a large number of people with Shivani," says Gupta, "unless one of them fits in with the conspiracy angle." Law is about proof, politics about perception. On the latter count Mahajan may be vulnerable. In 2001, nothing linked US Congressman Gary Condit to intern Chandra Levy's disappearance—but that didn't prevent negative fallout.

Part of the problem is that, in the rumour mills that abound at the intersection of Delhi's media and power circles, gossip about the Shivani-Mahajan equation is as old as the lady's death. Friends recall she often boasted of her Mahajan connection. While in Britain



DOCUMENT: WHAT PRADEEP TOLD THE POLICE

MURDER IN FIRST PERSON

ACCUSED Pradeep Sharma's interrogation report recounts the crime and implicates R.K. Sharma. Exclusive excerpts.

"IN 1996, I JOINED AS A CLERK AT THE CHANDIGARH OFFICE OF THE Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA). The following year, for fraudulently selling a plot of land whose owner had died, I was ... sent to Chandigarh jail for three months. HUDA suspended me. I returned to Delhi and dabbled in the property business on the advice of my childhood friend Satya Prakash, himself a property dealer hailing from Unth Lodha in Haryana's Jhajjar district. On January 19, 1999, Satya Prakash came over to my house and said my pending job at HUDA would be taken care of by an influential person. In return I had to do something for that person. No names were given. The same afternoon I met Sri Bhagwan, Satya Prakash introduced him to me ... I was asked to meet up with them the next day around 12.30 p.m. at Sri Bhagwan's office at Rajpur village in Delhi's farmland area of Chhat-tarpur. On January 20, I met the two. There was another person present who was not introduced to me. I was asked to kill a woman. No details were given.



HARD TO GET:
Pradeep in custody

ISHAN TANKHA/TODAY

The next day I got into a white Esteem (HR 26 K 9800) with Sri Bhagwan at the wheel. We started towards Navkunj Apartments. But two men positioned in a green car near the apartment building informed us Shivani had left the building ... I was asked to come back the next day. I refused to do the job the next day (January 22), and conveyed my lack of interest to Sri Bhagwan. Within minutes Satya Prakash called me up to say my job at HUDA would not be taken care of unless I got rid of Shivani.

The following day, January 23, 1999, I reached Sri Bhagwan's office yet again at around 12.30 p.m. We started out for Navkunj. Sri Bhagwan was at the wheel. The friend, never introduced to me, was there with me. From outside the complex Sri Bhagwan called Shivani using his mobile (9811008825). It became clear Shivani was alone. I was given the go ahead. I made an entry in the register at the gate. I declared my name as Rajeev Bhatnagar from Tribune Colony, Chandigarh. When Shivani opened the door, I said Mr Adhikari from Chandigarh had sent me, and I'd come to convey a message to her husband. Shivani let us in and offered tea ... The person who had come along with me strangled Shivani with a piece of electric wire. I fetched a knife from the kitchen and stabbed her ... We then left the building. Sri Bhagwan drove us back to Rajpur village. I haven't met him or the other man since.

Soon after, I came to know the task of killing Shivani had been assigned by Ravi Kant Sharma, a senior police officer. This was disclosed to me by Satya Prakash over a drink ... Satya Prakash also told me that Shivani was eliminated because she was blackmailing Sharma."



ORIGINAL SUSPECT

RAKESH BHATNAGAR

Shivani's husband was questioned 70-odd times in 1999. He remembers a Delhi Police officer calling R.K. Sharma and reporting what he (Bhatnagar) had told him a moment earlier. Bhatnagar, now exonerated, says he spoke to Sharma once. Shivani and he shared a cell phone and she often called Sharma on it.

in 1998, she told co-fellows that Sharma and Mahajan rang her frequently. Sharma's calls have been corroborated by phone records, Mahajan's are still a question mark. Was Shivani only boasting to create a mystique about her "contacts"?

THIS is not unlikely. To a small-town girl like Shivani, the press card was a passport to a world she could not naturally inhabit but one she longed for. The media used to be a dowdy old institution; today, it is all about glamour and access.

She was not alone in her possible misuse of a journalistic platform. Some practitioners have used the profession to become touts and fixers in official circles. Shivani is said to have done no more than harangue former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh into getting her brother admitted to Lucknow University. More than cutting "deals", she wanted to get "noticed", to rub shoulders with the movers and shakers. Her colleagues saw her as something of a social climber.

This was probably why Sharma appealed to her, though he was 15 years older. She first met him in the summer of 1997, when he was in the PMO and she was chasing a story on a medical college supposedly promoted by the



THE WOMAN THAT WAS SHIVANI

ACIDIC INSTINCT

VICTIM to friends, virago to rivals.

Shivani often said she would do anything for a scoop. Even bend the rules.

SATISH KUMAR REMEMBERS his daughter as being a “very bright student”. His voice trembles as he tells you, “Shivani was a voracious reader and English was her favourite subject in school.” A former Steel Authority of India employee and longtime RSS sympathiser—it explains why L.K. Advani attended his daughter’s wedding on July 18, 1996—Kumar must have been proud when he read the news reports Shivani wrote in her career at *The Asian Age* and *The Indian Express*.

Yet, if yesterday the media meant pride by association, today it has become a hate figure. Bristles Sevanti, Shivani’s younger sister: “So many things written about her personality are news to us... How do people know so much?” Barely 25 km from the power city of Lutyens’ Delhi, in a middle-class Ghaziabad home, the Kumars mourn their daughter, the “simple” girl who “loved kadhi-chawal”. This somehow glosses over the attitudinal distance their daughter travelled in her 32 years.

Steel executive Krishan Chand, Shivani’s classmate from nursery to Class XII at Bokaro’s St Xavier’s School, recalls her as thin, ordinarily dressed and nondescript. “She wouldn’t stand out in any crowd,”

he says. The introverted nature began to unravel at Delhi’s Daulat Ram College and, later, Jawaharlal Nehru University. By the time she joined *The Asian Age*, she was, in the words of a colleague, “loud, abusive in her choice of words and sometimes crude”. At JNU she had a steady boyfriend, but working life brought a string of liaisons she openly boasted about.

A friend sees it differently. While acknowledging “her writing could

have done with a lot of improvement”, there is admiration that she “knew how to work hard”. As even her family observes, Shivani was obsessive about her work. She would do anything for that one piece of information, that juicy quote. While covering the BJP, she would walk to the party office on Ashoka Road past 10 p.m. if she didn’t get an auto-rickshaw if the editor wanted some “extra stuff”.

Shivani wanted to get ahead, and fast. She wasn’t in journalism, friends say, to make friends but as much to make a mark. This edgy, restless bundle of nervous energy “wanted to be successful instantly and contacts with powerful people went to her head quickly”. Perhaps they cost her her life too.

—Shefalee Vasudev



ARRIVED IN LIFE: Advani at the Bhatnagar wedding

family of BSP politician Mayawati. They were introduced by a wheeler-dealer companion of a woman Congress MP residing in south Delhi’s R.K. Puram.

Sharma impressed Shivani with his smattering of French and knowledge of wines and European food. They met frequently at at least two central Delhi restaurants, Chor Bizarre on Asaf Ali Road and Basil and Thyme in the fashionable Santushti complex. Bhatnagar admits to having dropped his wife at both locations, sometimes wondering which “sources” she was meeting. Later, she visited Sharma at Hotel Ashok, where he stayed when he came down from Mumbai. The police “have

reason to believe the relationship was very intimate”. Records of a Patparganj taxi service reveal Shivani hired a vehicle to take her to the hotel on dates that match Sharma’s stay there.

One day late in 1998, colleagues say, Shivani walked into the *Express* office all charged up. She had asked Sharma to marry her, she said, after they both divorced their current spouses. He had refused and she vowed to “ruin him” with the help of amorous letters he had apparently written to her and revelatory notes she would pen to his wife. She was also vocally upset with Mahajan, who she claimed was not helping her in her battle

against Sharma. Her co-workers asked her to move on, hoping she would listen. A few weeks later she was dead.

What happens next? The investigators have their task cut out. In three months from July 30—the day the first arrest was made—they need to file a chargesheet in which they have to explain the telephone linkages, the pattern of the calls, the recoveries made, and the conspiracy itself.

Sharma, when the law catches up with him, is likely to deny everything, to make even more reckless charges, to further politicise the issue. The fun has just begun.

—with Vishwas Kumar