



Her last gift to him was a gray tie. It remains in an envelope in his New Delhi apartment. 'I tried to do things that made her happy.' MANPREET ROMANA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

India Rape Victim's Friend Describes Their Love Story

By **KRISHNA POKHAREL** | *The Wall Street Journal*

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NEW DELHI—She called him “a perfect man.” He still keeps her number stored in his cellphone, under the name Jewi, derived from a Sanskrit word meaning life.

“She was the closest person to my heart,” says the young man. Soon he is expected to tell a judge about the night she was raped aboard a private bus here, an attack that left his friend dead and the world horrified.

“I find myself surrounded by the pictures in my

mind of the incident of that night in the bus,” says the 28-year-old information-technology specialist, who was himself badly injured in the Dec. 16 attack. Broad-chested and plain-spoken, he now walks with a cane.

Speaking with The Wall Street Journal, he gave new details of the assault and described his close and complex relationship with his friend, a petite recent college graduate who was 23 at the time of her death. Both her name and his are being withheld due to Indian law governing the identification of the woman as a rape victim.

The case has stirred widespread protest and calls for justice. Five men face charges including rape, kidnapping and murder. Lawyers for the five say they are innocent. A sixth person accused, a juvenile, faces proceedings in juvenile court. A lawyer representing him couldn't be reached.

In many ways, the young man and his friend were a modern dating couple, yet still bound by caste and tradition. Living away from home, the two were making their way in India's widening professional class—she was a physiotherapist looking for her first job, he leads a team specializing in Internet voice technology for corporations.

They shared their problems, took vacations together and consulted each other even over the purchase of a pair of shoes. She once talked him out of investing in a company that turned out to be a fraud. He gave her the login details to his Facebook account.

Their families were aware of their closeness and didn't interfere, the young man and her family said. But the two friends felt their relationship would always be a friendship and not a marriage, he says. He came from a high-caste Brahmin background. His father is a prominent lawyer. His family lives in a three-story home with servants' quarters.

By contrast, his friend hailed from a Kurmi

agrarian caste that is lower on the Hindu hierarchy. Her family lives in a small concrete-and-brick house near the Delhi airport, where her father works as a laborer.

Differences like these worked against a union. And the young man says he was loath to go against his family's strong wishes that he find a traditional match from within his Brahmin community.

"We just didn't talk about it because it would sour our relationship," he says of his friend. "We were of equal status as friends."

In an interview, the young woman's mother said to the question of marriage: "You can't really say what could have happened in the future."

The young man's father says the subject of marriage never came up, but had their son made a fervent case, the family "might have given it a thought."

The two first made contact in December 2010. It wasn't exactly a success. A mutual friend had suggested that the young man might help her with her studies, and gave her his number.

"Hi, how are you?" she texted him. "What's going on?"

He thought it was the mutual friend, playing a prank.

"I know who you are, man," he replied. "Is this your new number?"

"I am not a boy, I am a girl," she responded.

The mutual friend intervened to end the confusion. Two months later, when the young woman was visiting New Delhi from her college in Dehradun, about five hours' drive away, he went to meet her for the first time at the bus station.

He approached the person he guessed was her. She was wearing a red top, a blue skirt and high heels, he says.

By way of breaking the ice, he walked up and

asked: “Where do I get a bus to Dehradun?”

Without even looking up, she pointed away. So he had to introduce himself.

Over lunch at McDonald’s and an afternoon tour of Delhi’s ancient Red Fort, they started getting to know each other. “I told her that I am from Gorakhpur,” a city in northern India, he says, recalling that day. “That I am from a Brahmin family. I have two brothers and three sisters. I am very close to my mother. That my father is a lawyer. That I worship God daily. That I am a foodie and like to go for movies. I drink milk daily. I am fond of wristwatches and have a good collection of them.”

It would grow into a welcome friendship as he found his way in New Delhi, where he moved in 2006 after graduating in engineering from a technical college. Back home in Gorakhpur, he had founded a group that he intended to focus on women’s empowerment and child development. But his family advised him to “first prove yourself, then work for others,” he says.

He joined HCL Infosystems, his current employer, in 2008. “He is a professionally very efficient person, a quiet worker, very responsible and hardworking,” says his boss there.

As the friendship grew, he and the young woman spoke frequently on the phone. “She was that friend for me with whom I can talk about my financial status and family problems openly,” he says. At times, he says, she called him “a perfect man.”

They started taking trips together to see holy sites. On May 10, 2011, her birthday, they met in Haridwar, a Hindu pilgrimage center on the Ganga river, about an hour’s drive from where she studied.

They traveled on cable cars to hillside temples before watching devotees take evening dips and worship the river.

By then, her family knew and liked him. He was

the friend she spoke to most, her mother says. “We thought of him as a gentleman,” she says. “He was safe.”

Five months later, the couple visited Vaishno Devi, another popular pilgrimage spot in the Himalayas. “It was very cold. We took the Shalimar Express train from Dehradun,” he says.

They climbed about seven miles to the sanctuary, worshiped there that evening, and hiked back to the hotel the following morning. “We bought some medicines for our legs that were aching severely,” he says, smiling sheepishly at the memory. “She also provided some physiotherapy treatment to my legs,” he said, pantomiming a rub on his leg.

In March, they went together to a shrine devoted to the Indian spiritual guru Sai Baba in the state of Maharashtra. A few months later, he gave her some inspirational books when they traveled to Rishikesh, another Hindu holy site famously visited by the Beatles in 1968.

Her last gift to him was a gray tie. It remains in an envelope in his New Delhi apartment. “I tried to do things that made her happy,” he says. “It’s because that’s how I could be happy, too.”

On their trips, they would share a hotel room. They held hands and hugged, he says, but didn’t go further. “Regarding the man-woman relationship, I have conservative views,” he says. They sang, joked and played cards and chess. He thought about her often when they were apart.

When they met on Dec. 16, the day of the attack, the two hadn’t seen each other for several weeks. “It was a strange and boring day,” he says.

That evening, after watching the movie “Life of Pi” at a mall, they strolled by a fountain and snapped some pictures. He wanted to linger, but she was eager to get home, he says.

They hailed a motorized rickshaw to a bus stop

where she could catch a ride home. A bus was there waiting, and someone on board called out to them, he says: “Didi, where do you have to go?” Didi means elder sister. The person calling out was the juvenile defendant later accused in the crime, the young man says.

The young man says the two boarded the bus and sat in the second row. The row in front was occupied by two men who appeared to be passengers, as did two other men seated across the aisle, he says.

Things were normal for about five minutes, he says, and he began to relax. “It’s OK for today, but don’t board these kinds of buses in the future,” he says he told his friend.

Then, three of the men asked the couple what they were doing with each other out at night, he says. That is when he knew they were in trouble.

He and his friend started shouting. She tried to call the police, but one of the men snatched her phone away, he says. He got into a struggle with one of the men. He says he heard shouts of “Bring the rod, bring the rod!”

He was struck repeatedly on the back of the head, and pounded on his legs, he says. Dizzy and bleeding, he fell to the floor. Police have accused the assailants of using a metal rod from the bus’s luggage rack in the assault.

She was dragged to the back of the bus, he says. The lights were off. He heard her crying for help, but he was pinned to the floor by one or more men, he says. Police allege she was gang-raped and sexually assaulted with a metal rod.

“I go to that moment again and again,” he says. “Just an hour before, everything was fine, and all of a sudden, everything had gone horribly wrong.”

Finally, he says, he heard the words, “She’s dead, she’s dead.”

The couple was thrown off the bus at the side of a

highway, according to the young man and the police. The two had been stripped naked. His friend was still alive. Eventually, they were brought to a hospital.

A lawyer for the driver of the bus has said his client acknowledged that a rape happened on his bus, but is innocent of all the charges. A lawyer for two of the accused has said his clients weren't on the bus at the time of the incident. A lawyer for another of the accused has said his client was tortured into making a false confession; police have declined to comment on that allegation. That lawyer has requested that the trial be moved outside New Delhi, arguing that his client won't get an impartial hearing locally. The Indian Supreme Court dismissed that request Tuesday. A lawyer for the fifth accused has said his client is innocent, too.

The father of the dead young woman, speaking of her friend's efforts on the night of the attack, says: "We are eternally thankful to him." If he hadn't been there, he says, his daughter might have disappeared without a trace.

Five days later, the young man visited his friend in the intensive-care unit of Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital. She had been so violently raped and beaten that much of her intestines had been surgically removed.

He says he apologized to her for letting her down. She replied, if only we had stayed longer by the fountain at the mall, as you had wished, perhaps we would have missed the bus.

She reminded him that it was exactly two years since they had first texted, he says. She tried to hug him, but she couldn't get up because of the medical equipment attached to her body. "She made a gesture of a hug," he says.

Later, she was transferred to Singapore for treatment. The young man says he learned of her death from a television report.

Today, he says, he weighs what might have been

between the two of them. “I would have been with her all my life,” he said in one interview recently. “Even if that meant taking the extreme step of going against the wishes of my family.”

—Saurabh Chaturvedi contributed to this article.