

# New Delhi Attack: The Victim's Story

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It was early afternoon just before Christmas in India's capital, and a young woman spoke to her friend on the phone, eager to get together.

"Wake up, wake up," she told him. "It's already very late—1 o'clock."

The two agreed to meet. And so began an innocent outing that set in motion a killing that would horrify the world.

The two met at Select Citywalk, a trendy mall where New Delhi's 20-somethings gather to spend pocket change and enjoy a small taste of the glamour promised by India's economic rise. The young woman—her family's nickname for her was "Bitiya," which means daughter—admired a long coat in a shop window, her friend said in an interview. He thought he would like to buy it for her later. Then, they took in a movie, "Life of Pi," sitting in the same seats where, on an earlier visit, they had watched "Gulliver's Travels" together.

A few hours later, the pair were dumped, naked and bleeding, from a private bus along a highway. Both had been viciously attacked with an iron rod, according to police, and the young woman so violently raped that she died two weeks later, on Dec. 29.

Her death has spawned a moment of

national introspection over the threats women face here, whether on the streets of the capital city or in the lanes of a distant village, despite the advances of India's liberalizing society and invigorated economy. Her life embodied the modern Indian dream, the one-generation upward transformation that millions here are pursuing.

The Wall Street Journal reconstructed the details of her life from interviews with family and friends, including the young man, a 28-year-old software engineer, who was with her when she was beaten. He was treated and released but still requires medical attention. The Journal is refraining from publishing the woman's name in keeping with Indian laws governing the identification of rape victims.

The young woman, the child of an airport laborer who earns 7,000 rupees a month (about \$130), was determined, her friends and family said, to become the first from her family, which hails from a caste of agricultural workers, to have a professional career. She was on the cusp of achieving it. She had enrolled in a yearslong physiotherapy course in a city in the foothills of the Himalayas. To afford it, she worked nights at an outsourcing firm, helping Canadians with their mortgage issues, family members and her friend said.

As she amassed some money of her own, she enjoyed figuring out how to spend it. Lately, she had her eye on a Samsung smartphone. One day she hoped to buy an Audi. "I want to build a big house, buy a car, go abroad and will work there," her friend, the software engineer, recalled her saying.

On Monday, five men who allegedly raped and killed her appeared before a New Delhi

court for the first time, their faces covered in gray woolen caps. All five face charges of kidnapping, rape and murder, among other crimes. They face the death sentence if found guilty. A sixth alleged assailant, a juvenile, faces proceedings before a juvenile court.

A lawyer for the accused couldn't be reached.

The family originally hails from Ballia in rural Uttar Pradesh state. They moved to the capital city, Delhi, about 30 years ago to seek "a better life," her father said. He worked for 13 years as a mechanic at an appliance factory. Then he struggled for a decade in his own business, assembling voltage meters. He worked as a hospital security guard.

About three years ago, he became a loader at the airport. He sold half of a small parcel of land to pay for the education of his daughter and her two younger brothers, who are now 17 and 15 years old.

The family lives in Mahavir Enclave on a 6-foot-wide lane off a decrepit street lined with shoe shops, dispensaries and jewelry stores. It is a neighborhood of migrants who work as construction laborers, building apartment houses for Delhi's blossoming middle class.

Her brothers recalled pillow-fights with their elder sister, who was only 5-foot-3 and weighed about 90 pounds. But she stood out as a high achiever in school. She earned pocket money tutoring other children. "She was the brightest student in the classroom," said a school friend who identified herself only as Nisha.

At first, Bitiya had wanted to be a doctor. But her father couldn't afford her tuition or find a suitable guarantor for a loan that a bank

would require.

The Sai Institute of Paramedical and Allied Sciences, in the city of Dehradun in the Himalayan foothills, offered an alternative: a 4½-year physiotherapy course that was more affordable. She enrolled in November 2008. A graduate from the school is expected to earn a monthly salary of nearly 30,000 rupees, more than four times what her father earns.

She attended classes from noon to 5 p.m., staff and her friends said. To pay the fees, she worked at a call center on the 7 p.m. to 4 a.m. shift, handling questions from Canadians about their mortgages and supervising a team of employees, friends and family said. The company couldn't be located.

When she first arrived at school in Dehradun, she was an "introverted and submissive" young woman who wore simple, traditional dresses, said Bhawna Ghai, a professor and head of the physiotherapy department.

But as the course progressed, she opened up. She left the dorm and moved into an apartment with two friends. She began choreographing and emceeding college dance recitals.

A good English speaker, she became an avid reader, particularly Sidney Sheldon novels, her college friends said. She was a fan, too, of "One Night @ the Call Center," a best-selling novel by Indian author Chetan Bhagat about six call-center workers.

Money remained an issue. Combining her studies and the call-center job was exhausting, friends said. "She slept for only two hours" a night, said Sheen Kaur, one of her roommates, in an interview. In all, she paid about \$3,300 in

tuition fees.

Along the way, she developed an eye for fashion. If she spotted an outfit she couldn't afford at the mall, her brother said, she would find ways to replicate it in the bazaars. She amassed a shoe collection, preferably high heels.

This past October, she returned to Delhi to look for a volunteer internship, a requirement to complete her physiotherapy studies.

On Dec. 16, the day of the attack, her family gathered at their home. The young woman and her mother cooked lunch—fritters in yogurt, beans, and puffy bread called *puri*. The siblings teased each other about who would steal a bite of their father's food.

After lunch, their father went to work on the 2 p.m. shift at the airport, one of her brothers recalled. And his sister went to see her friend at the mall, the meeting the two had earlier arranged on the phone. The two weren't dating, both he and the family said, but had been friends for years.

At the mall, her friend recalled noticing that she had put streaks in her hair—white, gold and red. She asked him what he thought. He says he wasn't really a fan of the look, but answered "It's OK," so as not to hurt her feelings. He also remarked that she seemed too thin.

"A lot of people struggle to get this physique," she responded.

After "Life of Pi" ended—she loved the movie, her friend said—they took a motorized rickshaw, an inexpensive, three-wheeled taxi, to Munirka on Delhi's main southern highway, a convenient point to board a bus toward her home.

The same evening, about five miles away in

a slum of about 300 dwellings known as Ravi Dass camp, two brothers, Ram and Mukesh Singh, were throwing a small party with chicken and alcohol, according to police. Ram was the driver of a private bus.

They were joined that evening by Vinay Sharma, a young man who earned \$40 a month as a helper at a local gym, police said. Earlier he had been watching television at home, according to his mother, Champa Devi, when a friend and local fruit-seller, Pawan Gupta, stopped by. Eventually, according to police, the two men joined the Singh brothers, who lived down a narrow lane nearby.

The group, which included one other man and a juvenile, decided to take what police have described as a “joy ride” on the bus that Ram Singh drove.

Around 9:15 p.m., police said, the bus pulled into the stop where the young woman and her friend were looking for a ride. The men aboard the bus offered them a lift to Dwarka, near the young woman’s home, according to police.

Four of the alleged assailants acted like regular passengers, according to the young man who boarded. One of them collected 20 cents for each ticket and the other drove.

The accused began taunting the woman with lewd comments, according to her friend, which led to a brawl. The young woman’s friend said that some of the men knocked him unconscious with an iron bar.

At the back of the bus, police said, the young woman was raped as the vehicle was driven around, passing Vasant Vihar, an upscale neighborhood which is home to embassies and expatriates. After about 40

minutes, according to police, the bus stopped near a strip of budget neon-lit hotels with names like Star, Venus and Highway Crown, that cater to travelers near the airport.

There, the men on the bus dumped the two friends, naked, by the side of the road in a dusty strip of dried grass, according to police and the young man. As the woman lay barely conscious, her friend, who was bleeding from a cut to the head but could now stand, waved his arms and shouted for help at passing cars. For more than 20 minutes, he said, no one stopped.

Several people who work in the area said that two employees of DSC Ltd., the company that built the highway and now runs it, were the first to attend to the two victims, around 10 p.m. The company declined to comment. One of the DSC employees put in a call to the police, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Moments later, a manager from one of the nearby hotels, a burly 28-year-old, got on his motorbike to head home. He passed the scene without stopping—but then turned back, struck by the image of blood streaming down the man's face.

He offered to get a sheet and a bottle of water from his hotel to cover them as they waited for the police, he said in an interview. One of the DSC employees gave a sweater to the young woman and a shirt to her friend. About 45 minutes after the two were dumped, the police arrived.

Around the same time as the young woman was being taken by police to Safdarjung Hospital, about eight miles away, her family was starting to grow concerned. Usually, her brother said, Bitiya returned home by 8:30 p.m. “We were really worried, but didn't have

any other option than waiting,” he said. He dialed the pair’s mobile phones without success.

Around 11:15 p.m., the police phoned and said the young woman had been in an accident. Her father rushed to the hospital with a neighbor on a motorbike. “It was a sinking feeling,” her brother said. “We feared for the worst.”

*—Preetika Rana, Amol Sharma and Aditi Malhotra in New Delhi contributed to this article.*