

The girl with the peacock tattoo

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Feisty: Though petite, Neetu was very courageous, says her sister Alka; not the kind to stay away from a confrontation. Javeed Shah/Mint

One evening in February last year, a girl raised many eyebrows in the conservative Jat neighbourhood of Matiala in west Delhi. She was returning

home from work when a group of young men passed lewd comments. Almost in a rage, the girl hopped off her autorickshaw and grabbed one of the boys by his collar.

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That day Neetu Solanki was wearing a boat-neck spandex top and low-rise jeans which revealed a peacock tattoo on her lower back, and a navel ring. “It was a classic Jat retaliation, rough and bold—except that it came from a girl,” says Alka Solanki, her 22-year-old sister, younger to Neetu by six years, and a postgraduate student of political science at Delhi University.

Just a week earlier, Neetu had come home with an eve-teaser’s bicycle. Her aggressive reaction had prompted the man to run away, leaving his ride behind. “She didn’t fear anyone, especially when she believed she was right. That day, she simply brought the bicycle home. Obviously, no one ever came to claim it,” says Alka, breaking into a giggle.

On 11 February, Neetu’s body was found stuffed in an airbag at the New Delhi railway station. Her throat had been slit with a sharp object. According to eyewitnesses, a young man rode up to the parking bay in an autorickshaw, dropped the bag and rode off. When the Delhi Police published a “hue and cry” notice to identify the body, the tattoo became a talking point. Eventually, her father came forth to claim her ashes. Now, investigators have named her boyfriend Raju Gehlot as the prime suspect.

Alka reminisces about the day her sister got the tattoo: “She was different from all of us. She was good at studies but that never meant she had to be simple. She picked up fashion trends quickly and tried them out on herself. She came home and showed it first to our father, who was amused. She was in pain for the next three days but the tattoo was like a hard-earned medal for her; it symbolized freedom and that kept her excited despite the pain.”

Even if an earthquake shook their building, Neetu wouldn’t be found running with her hair uncombed or dress crumpled, qualities she picked while growing up with her uncle in Jammu and Kashmir, who worked in the Indian Air Force, till she was 8.

Neetu's sartorial experiments often attracted unwanted attention. Her father Kartar Singh Solanki, who used to sell milk and is now a property dealer in the neighbourhood, would hear of such instances frequently. "It would happen at least once a week. Every single time, Neetu would yell back or chase whoever it was," he says. Then, of course, "she was beautiful", Alka adds, pointing to a framed photograph of a petite, clear-skinned girl with an impeccably made-up face and long straight hair, placed on the fridge next to her room at their three-storeyed home in Matiala. "She straightened her hair when it became a rage even though it was very expensive," recalls Alka, who was often reprimanded for her frizzy hair and promised a beauty treatment by Neetu at a parlour when she cleared her BEd exams.

And, though she appeared petite, "that's the mistake people made", says Alka. "Once she took on someone who whistled at her from his car. It must have been a Honda City, because when Neetu returned home, she said that it was a 'big, expensive' car. She was, to everyone's shock here, very courageous," Alka recalls.

This is why, when the Delhi Police repeatedly advertised last month, "we didn't think it could be her", Solanki says. "Neetu wasn't someone to be killed or overpowered. She would never die without a fight." The notice had appeared with a photograph which Solanki says was "too hazy" to recognize.

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claimant. "I was scared. Everyone fears the worst," Solanki whispers when quizzed.

The last time Solanki saw Neetu, who was working in a Gurgaon call centre at the time, was in May, when she told him she was being transferred to Singapore. The police later claimed she had been living in Delhi with Gehlot, a crew member with Air India; the company says Gehlot has resigned. Neither the police nor Neetu's relatives are sure whether she had married Gehlot. The motive for the murder remains unclear. The police haven't found the murder weapon, Gehlot is absconding.

Various conspiracy theories are doing the rounds, but the story of the girl remains curiously robust with a string of tales about her choice of men and careers, an ambitious, independent woman who dressed and behaved exactly how she thought right, without worrying about what her conservative neighbours would think. Her late hours at the call centre jobs—her father claims, and the police corroborates, that she worked at BPOs such as IBM Daksh, Convergys and Teleperformance—the buzz around her murder, the bohemian tattoo and her ‘live-in’ relationship with Gehlot have become the subject of popular “off the record” gossip.

Rajdharam Sehrawat, an iron trader who lives a few blocks away from the Solanki household, has three daughters. Till a few years ago, “my daughters would play with them (Neetu and Alka) but now, two of my daughters are happily married”, Sehrawat says. “Who keeps a 28-year-old daughter unmarried for her to run away?”

When Neetu lived in the neighbourhood, the likes of Sehrawat often posed this question to Kartar Singh Solanki, a fellow Jat. He always replied: “They are my daughters. I want them to study.”

Today, Solanki says he is no longer in touch with any childhood friends of Neetu because “the girls she played with are all married now with children. Girls in the Jat community are married early. And who knows office colleagues these days? Children begin disliking their parents’ presence even in parent-teacher meetings these days. As for offices, you cannot even enter those places if you don’t work there”.

Despite the apparent secrecy around her friends and the nature of her job, Neetu’s video chats with her family were quite frequent and open. The chats, Alka says, would last for hours, and would only happen when their father was home because “she loved her father”. Conversation oscillated between inane and grim topics. “Once, she joked about donating her heart to our mother since she is a heart patient. She also promised our brother a sports bike if he did well in his Board exams,” Alka says.

Born in 1982, Neetu went to two public schools, first in Jharoda Kalan and then in Matiala; she signed up for a software engineering course at Aptech in addition

to a correspondence course from Delhi University and later graduated from the university's law faculty.

"She also enrolled for a management degree from Punjab Technical University (PTU) but abandoned it midway for a job because she wanted to start earning," says Monika Roka, Alka's friend and a student at PTU, Jalandhar, who had known Neetu for six years. Roka says she enrolled in the management course at PTU only on Neetu's encouragement. "She was our career and fashion guide. She always listened to us and would make us laugh if we were anxious or worried about anything. But often, she would tell us how she being the eldest she had no one to lead her. She was a wise counsel for everyone younger to her, but for herself, she had no wisdom," Roka says.

After university, Neetu also decided to try her hand at politics, and her relatives say the decision was guided purely by her own interest in the subject. In 2007, she contested the municipal elections in Delhi from Matiala as an independent candidate and lost, polling just about 150 votes. "She was a little child, enthusiastic about the polls, but I didn't take her seriously. Wasn't she a novice?" says her experienced opponent at the time and Bharatiya Janata Party councillor Rajesh Gehlot. Counters Roka, "Even as an independent candidate, people knew her!"

Neetu's shots at education and later, call centre jobs and politics were all self-driven, and supported by her father, who always was eager to finance her education with an eye closed to details. "She brought her boyfriend home twice. I never interfered in anything she did. I trusted her to always do the right things," Solanki says.

For many years, Alka says, her father has stayed home to cook breakfast and lunch for his children since mother Susheela Solanki's cardiac surgery 10 years ago. "If I ask my children to make tea, they will never study," says Solanki. Solanki also has two sons—Keshav, 24, works with him and Rahul, 17, is studying.

Dev Chowdhary, tuition teacher for Rahul, who is preparing for medical entrance examinations, often finds Solanki waiting in municipal parks for the time tuition classes continue.

"For many years now, he has never failed to bring him for classes. While parents from his community don't generally bother to discuss their children's education with teachers, Solanki always does that," Chowdhary says.

Yet, somewhere between her academic pursuits and her ambition to build a career for herself, Solanki says his daughter perhaps lost direction. "She fell in love with the wrong man and started keeping a few facts from us. That destroyed her," he says.

At his Matiala residence, where a group of women were mourning loudly, Solanki appeared visibly disturbed, but he was also active in hosting a steady flow of visitors who kept trickling in to offer condolences. "It (Neetu's death) has shaken me. Now, I want to see my son addressed as 'doctor' in the next six years," he says.

"I guess I've pretty much told you everything, right?" he remarks, promising to be back after seeing off a visitor.

By his own account, Solanki had spent years selling milk before reaching a position of moderate wealth. His struggles have become his children's inspiration and he doesn't want to stop, says Alka. "My father wanted to be a doctor but couldn't," she explains, while her brother Rahul looks up from the books he has been poring over for hours, startled by the sudden reappearance of his father.

"My son has his exam tomorrow. Will you please leave him alone now? You are disturbing his studies," Solanki addresses this reporter angrily.

As this reporter prepares to make a quick exit, he asks wryly: "Won't you even say sorry?"

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