

Investigation in the life and death of the Movie Actress Pratyusha

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The case I am going to narrate is fresh in the minds of all the people. The death of the Telugu movie actress is on the lips of investigators, journalists, and politicians apart from general public. I was Inspector Panjagutta at that time.

This case clearly exhibits the overzealous investigative journalism, hasty conclusions of the autopsy doctor and careless actions of the treating hospital. It culminated in burying of the facts of the investigation and surfacing of only superfluous facts. Many a time the senior officers underwent various pressures and were also forced to spell out inconclusive opinions in the media resulting in delay and obstacles to the investigation.

Bhongir is a town in Nalgonda Dist where Pratyusha was born. With her parents and brother, she came to Hyderabad in 1991-92. She joined St. Ann's at Tarnaka and Gouthami Jr. College, Hyderabad for her intermediate (BPC group). She and Siddhartha Reddy, also a student of same institution, fell in love. After Inter, she took up a course in Hotel Management with the JB Institute of Hotel Management, Banjara Hills. She hailed from a middle class family. Her father was a bank employee and mother was a schoolteacher. She got her film break in Rayudu in the year 2000, the role of the hero's sister. Soon, she was a shining movie star, acting as a heroine in a series of Telugu feature films and a Tamil film and she was to act in a Kannada film and several offers were pouring in.

On 24.2.2002 at 14.00 hrs Panjagutta Police Station was informed by Care hospital, Banjara Hills that Kumari S. Pratyusha, 20 yrs, died due to Organo phosphorous poisoning in their

hospital. The Police were not informed that it was the death of an upcoming actress of considerable fame. SI Panjagutta P.S. went to the hospital and realized that it was a case of death of a cine star and saw the gathering of 200 to 300 persons in front of the hospital. With great difficulty the SI ascertained the facts, that she and Siddhartha Reddy came to the Hospital at around 8 pm in a car and Siddhartha informed the doctors that they had consumed pesticide poison with an intent to commit suicide. Pratyusha's mother came to the Police Station at 15.00 hrs and lodged a complaint wherein she stated that at 8.30 PM on 23rd Feb 2002, Care Hospital informed her that her daughter consumed poison and she also specified the reason, that it was due to unwillingness of Siddhartha Reddy's mother to marry her son to Pratyusha. Pratyusha's mother further told the Police that when she last telephoned her daughter, she had told her that she was with Siddhartha Reddy. She informed that Pratyusha died on 24.2.2002 at 11.45 hrs.

What actually should have been a simple case of a suicidal pact between two lovers requiring investigation by simple methods by an officer of the rank of a Sub-Inspector of Police, gained importance up to discussion in the Legislative Assembly, scrutiny of A.P. High Court, investigation from the rank of Inspector from Panjagutta Police Station to the rank of Dy. Supdt of Police, CBI due to over indulgence of professionals like the Asst. Professor who declared to the media prematurely that the death of Pratyusha was rape and murder and issued PME report on 26.2.2002 stating *"Pressure over the neck, asphyxia due to manual strangulation. However viscera preserved for chemical analysis to detect poison, if any. Semen collected from vagina for grouping and*

DNA finger printing test." Panjagutta Police under various constraints altered the section of law from 174 Cr. P.C. to 302 IPC. The Commissioner of Police, Hyderabad ordered a detailed probe to collect evidence in all angles since the Asst. Professor created a sensation. The Director General and Inspector General of Police told the media that it was a suicide. The media started fantasizing on the statement of the autopsy doctor and termed it as a gang rape and murder and alleged that children of Ministers and other young guys were involved.

The Police were under intense pressure to unearth the truth. In the first instance, the mother of Pratyusha had stated that it was due to a love affair with Siddhartha Reddy that her daughter committed suicide. But, on the following day, she changed her stance to that of rape and murder by Siddhartha Reddy and his friends. Pratyusha's mother was waging unabated criticism over Police and Care Hospital, crying for justice and she was glaringly pointing out that CARE has caused disappearance of the clothes of her daughter and Police were under influence to save Siddhartha Reddy. Media was devouring her interviews and sensationalizing them. Though Police had played no role in any manner to neglect the investigation, they were looked down upon, as though they were shielding the guilty Siddhartha Reddy and his friends. Women Forums actively went in support of Pratyusha's mother and there were dharnas seeking a probe by a Sitting judge of High Court.

The task of the Police was to know what happened between the time that Pratyusha and Siddhartha Reddy left together from the beauty parlour in Siddhartha Reddy's Zen car on 23.2.2002 at about 18.00 hrs to the time they were admitted in Care Hospital. Where had they moved together? What had they spoken to each other? Pratyusha was treated for classic symptoms of organo-phosphorous poisoning which explained the ante-mortem therapeutic injuries on the body of Pratyusha, on her neck

and groins, which the autopsy doctor had prematurely claimed as nail marks.

The following questions needed to be answered:-

Why had Care Hospital failed to preserve the clothes and vomit of Pratyusha?

Whether Siddhartha Reddy had manually strangulated her and raped her?

Whether Siddhartha Reddy had consumed the pesticide or not?.

From where had they purchased the pesticide and where had they consumed it?

What was the medium used to consume pesticide because pesticide is consumed usually in liquor, toddy or cold drink?

It was required to:- Collect stains, if any from Maruti Zen car used by Siddhartha Reddy. To examine the beauticians of the Beauty Parlour. To ask for intervention of Professor & Head of Department of Forensic Medicine, Gandhi, Osmania and Kakatiya Medical Colleges to clarify and give second opinion on cause of death of Pratyusha and injuries found on her. To collect call details from Mobile phone companies to trace the calls made or received by Siddhartha Reddy and Pratyusha during their sojourn together. Their trail for the one-hour duration had to be established with meaningful evidence. Only then would the media and the Government be satisfied.

I was entrusted the investigation from the Sub-Inspector to find out the above information. According to the evidence gathered from the CARE hospital, there were no injuries on Pratyusha's body at the time of admission and therapeutic injuries found on neck, arms and groins were made by the doctors for incubation purpose.

Panjagutta Police under the supervision of

ACP, Panjagutta probed and collected evidence in a short time to show that it was a suicide pact between Siddhartha Reddy and Pratyusha. They obtained the details of friends of Siddhartha Reddy and carefully collected evidence showing that Siddhartha Reddy had informed his friend that he consumed poison in the Pick and Move lane of Hyderguda and had thrown the pesticide bottle there itself. The doctors had asked the friends to bring the bottle and one friend by name Bhaskar had gone and brought the Nuvocron pesticide bottle and handed over to the doctors of Care Hospital so as to assist in determining the course of treatment. Next, the Police collected evidence to show that Care Hospital had failed to preserve the clothes of Pratyusha which the Ayah in the Hospital had collected along with other hospital wastage and it was disposed off on the same day. However, the Police succeeded in collecting the stomach washings of the deceased Pratyusha as well as Siddhartha Reddy and also all his clothes from the Care Hospital. There was clear negligence on the part of the Care Hospital in not preserving the clothes of the deceased, not having interaction with relatives of deceased and not releasing hospital bulletins in time.

On 28.2.2002 the FSL clarified that the viscera of the deceased and the stomach washings had shown presence of organophosphate, an insecticide poison, and there was no semen or spermatozoa on vaginal swabs of the deceased. Therefore, it was the Asst. Professor who had misled the media and Police (he was later suspended) by stating that it was a case of manual strangulation and rape. Further it was found that the stain in the car was actually an ice cream stain.

On 1.3.2002 we examined the close personal friends of Siddhartha Reddy and it was found that on 23.2.2002 at about 7 pm, one

of the friends by name Suraj Reddy telephoned Siddhartha Reddy. Siddhartha responded to the call and told him that he would call back later as he was with Pratyusha. All the friends knew about the love affair of Siddhartha Reddy with Pratyusha. At 7.10 PM Suraj again called Siddhartha Reddy but received no response. At 7.30 pm Siddhartha Reddy contacted another friend named Bhaskar and informed him that he was going to CARE Hospital, Banjara Hills and asked all his friends to come there. They all went and found Siddhartha and Pratyusha in a serious condition and came to know that they had both consumed poison in a bid to commit suicide. Thus, it was a suicide pact between two lovers and the investigation clearly proved it. However the media, Pratyusha's mother and the autopsy doctor played controversial roles to side track the investigation.

The case was later investigated by the CID and then by the CBI under the scrutiny of the A.P. High Court and charge sheet was filed, as expected, in the Court of Sessions U/s 306 and 309 IPC Siddhartha Reddy was convicted for 5 years R.I with fine.

Several persons- both laymen and experts (so called) went around expressing doubts on the investigation done by the local police, only, on the premise that the abundant smoke generated by the media must have had at least some fire behind it. However neither the CID nor the CBI found any fault with our investigation.

The above case is a standing example, showing how the Police come under severe stress during investigation of sensational cases. Had precautions not been taken at every step at Police station level to bring out the facts, the guilty would not have been punished under appropriate provisions of law as was got done by the CBI.