

The Gurugram School Murder

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 juggernaut

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*To Manmeet Kumar, my spiritual coach,
who taught me courage and continues to teach me the
value of black, white and beyond*

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A Note on Names

This is a true story. However, in accordance with a court order, the names of the victim, the victim's family, the accused, the accused's family, the school and all associated staff, and the board and trustees related to the school have all been changed.

Prologue

Blood Tracks

The morning of 8 September 2017 seemed like any other morning at a private school in Bhondsi, thirteen kilometres outside Gurugram. At approximately 8.02 a.m., the school gardener, Harjot, made his way towards the boys' bathroom on the ground floor. Just as he was about to enter the bathroom, a panic-stricken student rushed out and told Harjot that something seemed to have happened to a young student of the school inside the washroom. Harjot rushed to check on the child, and on seeing what he did, immediately sped away to get help.¹ The day's routine was interrupted by Harjot's frantic and desperate calls for help. A few seconds later when the first couple of teachers reached the corridor

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outside the bathroom, they were shocked to see a little boy, Prince Thakkar, lying in a pool of blood. It was evident that the boy had reached the corridor by dragging himself from one of the toilet cubicles of the bathroom. Tracks of blood marked his attempt to seek help. He must have collapsed upon reaching the corridor. Everyone was taken aback by this gory sight, most of them shocked into inaction. There was blood all over the crime scene – the corridor outside the washroom, the walls of the washroom and, upon further inspection, one of the toilet cubicles was found overwhelmingly smeared with blood. The cubicle door was splattered all over with blood.

That the washroom had been the site of a ghastly act was beyond doubt. These fears were confirmed when a knife with a rusted blade and wooden handle was discovered in the bloodstained Indian commode.²

The horrifying sight of the little boy covered in blood would have moved even the most stony-hearted person. Most of the school authorities were too stunned to react. They were shaken out of their stupor when one of them, the school coordinator, yelled, ‘Pick him up, pick him up!’ She looked at Harjot, indicating that he should pick up the child. But Harjot was too nervous and didn’t move. He couldn’t muster the

Prologue

courage to pick up the bleeding child even though he badly wanted to help him. The coordinator then helplessly turned towards Amit Kumar, a conductor of one of the school buses, standing near the water filter. 'Please help me pick up the child and carry him to the car. It would be the right thing to do.' Amit dutifully rushed towards the boy and carried him to a Wagon R car owned by the school that was parked near the entry gate of the building. The driver of the car, a school employee, was ready behind the steering wheel.³ The car drove away with Prince, who was accompanied by the school nurse and a couple of other school staffers, leaving behind the crowd that had gathered at the spot in a frantic state. In the meantime, at approximately 8.10 a.m., the school receptionist informed Prince's father that his child had been severely injured.⁴ The police were also informed of the incident by the school's receptionist some time later.

As soon as the car reached Safe Hands Hospital in Badshahpur, Prince, who was apparently still alive,⁵ was hurriedly taken to the emergency ward. However, he didn't seem to respond to any of the interventions. When the doctors performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on Prince, they claimed to have felt a pulse. They went on to administer first aid and

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emergency medical aid to the child, but it wasn't enough. The doctors were of the opinion that Prince should be taken to Artemis Hospital immediately as their hospital wasn't equipped to handle such a severe case. The school coordinator, who had driven there in another vehicle, did not waste a single moment and did as she was instructed. She informed Prince's father that they were going to Artemis.

Already under tremendous pressure, the coordinator broke down when the doctors at Artemis Hospital declared that Prince had been brought dead. She pulled herself together, before informing the school authorities that Prince had succumbed to his injuries.

1

The Phone Call

It was October 2009. Bhaskar Thakkar was given the good news by his family doctor. He hugged his wife, Jaya Thakkar. 'The result is positive. You are expecting again!' cried Bhaskar excitedly.

They had a beautiful daughter. Now all they needed to complete their family was a son. Jaya held Bhaskar's hand, smiling, hopeful. There was no joy that compared to the joy of parenthood for her. Bhaskar and Jaya lived in a rented house in Maruti Kunj, with Bhaskar working for an export house called Orient Craft Limited. They had arrived in Gurugram from Bihar in 2001, just as the city was emerging as a finance and technology hub. Worried that Jaya spent all her days alone while he was at work, Bhaskar thought it might be better if she stayed with his parents in Jamshedpur in the final months of her pregnancy.

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And so Jaya moved there, but the two of them would spend hours talking on the phone. Jaya told Bhaskar about how she saw the baby's body forming in her womb on her regular visits to the ultrasound clinic. On the day of her five-month ultrasound, she phoned Bhaskar and exclaimed, 'I can see the little head, the tiny hands and legs.'¹

Like most expecting parents, Jaya and Bhaskar formed a bond with their unborn child which was growing stronger by the day. Jaya would feel the baby kick and her excited daughter would often touch her mother's stomach to feel her sibling twisting and turning. On 7 May 2010, at around 12.11 p.m., Jaya gave birth to Prince Thakkar in Jamshedpur.

As a baby, Prince never troubled his parents. He was always happy and satisfied with what he had. Bhaskar and Jaya remember every detail of Prince's first steps and how 'Ma' was the first word he said. They remember it all.

Prince was very close to his parents. He shared a special connection with his mother, always clinging to her before falling asleep, his tiny fingers holding on to her hand. 'He insisted on sleeping next to me,' recalls Jaya.

'Whenever I was unwell, he would run to me

The Phone Call

repeatedly . . . a few days before this incident, I was lying on my bed and the moment he saw me, he was worried. He asked me if he could massage my head and legs to make me feel better. And with a tinge of innocence, he asked me if he would be allowed to have a chocolate or an ice cream later on.'

In 2013, the Thakkars had moved to Shyam Kunj where they constructed their own house, an important moment for any Indian family. They lived in a gated community close to their children's school in Bhondsi.

Like many children his age, Prince loved sweet things and sometimes stole sweets from the fridge. Mangoes were his favourite fruit. Sometimes his parents would allow him to sit in just a pair of shorts on the cold hard floor and devour them. He would bite into the mangoes, the juices flowing everywhere, without worrying about getting messy.

Prince liked to cycle around the neighbourhood in the evenings. He did well at school and was even learning how to play the piano. Like many children, every time he heard an airplane in the distance, he would run to the roof of the house and look up at the sky. He told his father he wanted to become a pilot when he grew up.

Earlier in 2017, Prince had seen people roller

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skating on television and begged his parents to buy him a pair of skates. A few days later, while shopping at a sports store in Gurugram, Prince even tried on a pair, and his mother was impressed by what a natural he was. But she was also scared he could hurt himself and so ‘we promised him we’d buy the skates next year’, Jaya recalled.

When Prince turned seven, Jaya and Bhaskar decided not to have any more children. They knew their family was complete. But this picture-perfect family was upended by a phone call on the morning of 8 September 2017. Life, as Bhaskar and Jaya knew it, would never be the same.

‘Little did I know he would not live long enough to get his roller skates,’ his mother would later say.



After dropping off his seven-year-old son and eleven-year-old daughter at their school at approximately 7.59 a.m., Bhaskar had driven back home. On the car ride to the school, Prince, who usually let his sister sit in front, had insisted on sitting up front next to his father. On reaching the school he waved Bhaskar goodbye and walked towards the building with his sister.²

The Phone Call

When Bhaskar got back home from the school run, he parked his car outside his house and rang the doorbell. Shortly thereafter, at around 8.10 a.m., the phone rang.³ The voice on the other side, the school receptionist, was frantic. 'Mr. Thakkar, please rush to Safe Hands Hospital. Your ward has been injured and is bleeding profusely. Please hurry.'⁴

It was evident that something terrible had happened. Bhaskar started shaking; he hadn't even been told if it was his daughter or his son who had been injured. He called back on the same number, getting through to the caller only on the third try. 'Can you tell me if it's my daughter or my son who's injured?' asked Bhaskar in a panic.⁵ He was told that it was his son who was being rushed to the hospital. The receptionist apparently didn't have any more information that she could give him. He called out to his wife, asking her to drop whatever she was doing and rush to the hospital with him. 'Prince is hurt,' he said. Jaya felt her stomach turn as she switched off the gas in the kitchen and ran to the car outside.

Numerous thoughts crossed their minds as the couple drove towards the hospital. Irritated with the traffic, Bhaskar was desperate to quickly reach the hospital. He was hurriedly trying to make his

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way through the chaos, when he got a call from the school coordinator asking him to come to Artemis Hospital instead.

Finally, they entered the premises of Artemis Hospital, located in Gurugram's sector 50. The pair rushed to the emergency ward of the hospital. Jaya waited at the reception as Bhaskar ran to meet the concerned doctor, who informed him that his son had been brought dead.

Bhaskar was taken into the room where Prince lay, lifeless. He was convinced that the doctors were wrong and that Prince would wake up at any moment. To Bhaskar, his son appeared to be sleeping peacefully. But when a lifeless Prince showed no signs of opening his eyes, Bhaskar broke down inconsolably.⁶

As per hospital reports, Prince was brought in unconscious and unresponsive, and his body was cold, pale and drenched in blood. There was no activity recorded on the cardiac monitor. He was declared to have been brought dead at 8.37 a.m.⁷

Mustering all the courage he could, Bhaskar walked back to Jaya. He was unsure of how to break the news to his wife. He held her tightly and looked her in the eye before telling her that their son was dead. Jaya collapsed when she heard this, even as

The Phone Call

Bhaskar tried to console her.⁸ He made some calls to a few relatives and friends who rushed to be by their side. He asked one of his friends to take Jaya home, in spite of her vehement protests. By now several employees from Bhaskar's office had also collected outside the hospital.

The drive back home from the hospital was one that Jaya can barely recollect now. Her heart was sinking and her legs seemed to be giving way. 'My Prince cannot leave me. He can't leave me like this,' she cried weakly. By the time the car stopped outside their home, Jaya was inconsolable. She could hardly walk. Inside their living room, she wept until she finally fainted.⁹

Their neighbours who were at the house managed to revive Jaya. By then a huge crowd of family, friends, co-workers and neighbours had gathered at the house, inside and outside. Reporters from the print and electronic media had also rushed to the school, hospital and the Thakkars' residence to cover the story. The couple's daughter had been picked up from school and brought home. She learnt about the incident only when she returned home after her exam. Jaya embraced her daughter and let out a blood-curdling scream.¹⁰ 'Be strong, Jaya, you have a daughter who

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needs you and you have to take care of her,' said a neighbour. His words seemed to have little effect on Jaya. Their daughter was terrified to see her mother in such a state.

The acting principal of the private school, and the school coordinator remained at Artemis Hospital until the body was sent for a post-mortem examination to the mortuary. The school nurse who was also there with them had left after the doctors informed Bhaskar that Prince had been brought dead.

On the directions of executives of the parent body that ran the school,¹¹ some of the school's staff members, including the coordinator, went to the Thakkar residence in Shyam Kunj later that day to offer their condolences. But the crowd gathered there, seething and simmering with anger against the school for Prince's murder, attacked them when they found out that they were from the school.¹² 'How could the school let this happen?' they asked. They were apparently abusive and even physically roughed up one of the teachers. Another one of the teachers apparently fell while rushing to avoid being attacked outside the Thakkar home.¹³

Inside, the Thakkars didn't even know that the teachers had come to meet them. Jaya would later

The Phone Call

say, 'Was it not simply inhuman of the school administration not to have made any attempt to stand by us during such a difficult time? All the teachers who claimed to love Prince were silent. It was all very strange.'

Strange it was. How does a child end up murdered inside the bathroom of a well-regarded and high-profile school?