Cop's hunt for kidnapper ends after a 15-year wait

Karn Pratap Singh
karn.singh@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: A lot has changed in Delhi since the day Mahesh Choudhary, then 45, was abducted while he was driving in his Chevrolet Tavera SUV to Kanpur with two passengers 15 years ago. Roads have become wider and busier; flyovers and underpasses have been built; the Aam Aadmi Party(AAP), which did not even exist at the time, has now been in power for over seven years. But one of the constants during these years has been a lone policeman doggedly trying to solve the case.

Assistant sub-inspector (ASI) Sanjeev Tomar's quest ended on May 28, when he and members of his team arrested a man named Hari Om for abducting and killing Choudhary.

Tomar, 47, now posted with the crime branch, was a constable at the Badarpur police station when the crime took place in 2007. "The only clue that Choudhary's family could provide was that he had asked his wife to cook egg curry for Hari Om, who was going to travel to Kanpur with him," said Tomar.

Choudhary went missing on April 4, 2007 and the case was registered five days later, after his son, Rakesh Choudhary, then 22, filed a missing complaint.

Choudhary owned the Tavera and drove it as a taxi. He lived with his family at Molarband Extension near Badarpur.

For the police, the name Hari Om was a blind lead since they knew nothing else about him.

Tomar got the call details record of the Chadhary's cellphone, and traced its last location to Akbarpur near Kanpur. Before starting the Kanpur trip, Choudhary had received three or four calls from a number, which later turned out to be that of a man called Hari Om, a native of Jathiapur village in Kanpur Dehat district. Om, therefore, emerged as the prime suspect, and the investigation revealed that he was seen driving the Tavera to his native village, and then to his wife's house in Kanpur.

Long manhunt

Over the next few weeks, a series of raids carried out at Hari Om's village; and over the next two years at places linked to him in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. But there was no trace of the man.



ASI Sanjeev Tomar



The victim, Mahesh Choudhary.

Tomar says that he and other team members disguised themselves as hawkers, grain merchants, surveyors and even employees of the electricity department, to gather information about Om.

"In June 2008, we spent over a week outside Om's village after getting information that he would come to meet his family members. I bought an old bicycle for ₹400, dressed like a hawker, and sold groundnuts in his village. Our information was correct, but Om outsmarted us by visiting his family for around an hour at about 3am. By the time we reached his house, he had fled," said the assistant sub-inspector.

Between April 2007 and July 2009, the Choudhary abduction case was handed to four investigating officers, and led to multiple raids by different teams. In July 2009, Hari Om was declared a proclaimed offender (PO). The case was closed after being termed as "untraced/unsolved", though police also announced a ₹50,000 cash reward for his arrest.

Though the case was dead on paper, it wasn't for ASI Tomar.

Even Choudhary's family was losing patience.

"For one year, I assisted the police in their investigation and accompanied them in several raids. But then I lost the endurance. Being the eldest among five siblings I had the responsibility to take care of them and our mother," Choudhary's son, Rakesh, said.

"I lost focus on the case and concentrated on earning a livelihood. But Tomar sir is a different person altogether. He never gave up, and remained in touch with my family throughout," Rakesh added.

The breakthrough

Though there was no headway for a decade-and-a-half, the breakthrough came in March.

ASI Tomar said that crime branch personnel were asked to work on unsolved cases and arrest proclaimed offenders absconding for years. Seeing it as an opportunity to pursue the Choudhary case officially, Tomar told his bosses about it. After getting a go-ahead, he teamed up with his four colleagues and again activated his informers in the suspect's village.

"I never let my informers get 'non-operational' as I constantly remained in touch and supported them in whatever way possible. They also did not disappoint me. On May 10, one of them told me about the suspect's movement in the village. We mounted surveillance on the cellphones of the family members of the suspect, his brother in particular, and learnt about his next visit on May 27. We left for the village the same day," said Tomar.

That night, Hari Om was sleeping on the terrace of his house. Fifteen years after he first started looking for him, Tomar and his men managed to nab him when he least expected it.

When the raiding team asked Hari Om during the investigation about Choudhary and his SUV, he told them of what had happened on that fateful day – Om said that he killed Choudhary, and abandoned his SUV on a street in Kanpur.

Choudhary's son Rakesh said Hari Om had once visited his shop to meet his father. His father knew him as a driver for the past few weeks. But the family did not know where Hari Om lived.

Om told the police that he hired Choudhary's taxi on the pretext of visiting his in-laws' house in Kanpur and bring back his wife, who had gone there after a domestic quarrel. He said he wanted to steal Choudhary's car.

Om and his friend, Rakesh, picked up a bottle of liquor in Aligarh, and kept inducing Choudhary into having more until he was drunk. A couple of kilometers before his village, near the local canal, Om asked Choudhary to stop the car saying he needed to urinate. As the vehicle came to a halt, Rakesh put a cloth around Choudhary's neck from the rear seat, while Om smashed his head with a brick, killing him on the spot. They then threw Choudhary's body in the canal, washed the blood from the SUV and headed to the village.

Job not done

Om was arrested, and the case was finally solved, but the job wasn't done. Tomar said the toughest job was to inform the family that Choudhary was murdered brutally.

Rakesh said he was about to leave for Ahmedabad for a kidney stone removal surgery, when Tomar called him and said, "Humne aapke papa ke case mein kisi ko pakda hai, aao aur dekho pehchan sakte ho ya nahi (We have caught someone in your father's case. Come and see if you can identify him)."

Tomar's efforts has been acknowledged by several senior police officers, including deputy commissioner of police (crime) Amit Goel, who led the crime branch team that arrested Hari Om. "ASI Tomar played a pivotal role for the last one year in the case," DCP Goel said on May 29.

ASI Tomar, however, says he is not done yet. He is back at work to find and arrest the second suspect – Rakesh.

Cops save man from jaws of death in Delhi

SNS & AGENCIES
NEW DELHI, 1 JULY

The Delhi Police saved the life of a person who was allegedly attempting suicide by hanging himself from ceiling of his house in Jahangirpuri area of the national capital on Thursday.

Delhi Police received a PCR call on the intervening nights of Wednesday and Thursday at about 2.30 am regarding hanging of a person in a house in D-block, Jahangirpuri. Personnel from Jahangirpuri police station immediately reached the spot and they found one person hanging from the ceiling fan of his room. The room was found locked from inside. Policemen acted swiftly and forcefully opened the door and rescued the person from making suicide attempt.

One of the personnel hold his legs up while the other opened the knot of chunni used for hanging.

Police also gave CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) to the victim and rushed him to BJRM Hospital for treatment.

Cops save man who attempted suicide

New Delhi: The Delhi police, on Thursday, saved the life of a 40-year-old man who allegedly hanged himself in Northwest Delhi's Jahangirpuri area, officials said. On Thursday, at around 2.30 am, the police received information regarding the hanging of a person at a house in D-block, Jahangirpuri. The police reached the spot and found that one person had hanged himself from the ceiling fan in a room, a senior police officer said. The room was found locked from inside. The police opened the door and rescued the person from suicidal attempt. He was also given CPR and rushed to the BJRM Hospital for treatment.