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HARDLOOK

A lens on crime

Crime scene photographers play an understated but crucial part in cracking police cases. *Arnabjit Sur* provides a glimpse into how they function

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AROUND 4 PM, head constable Ajay Sharma, a Delhi Police photographer with the North district's crime team, received a call from the control room regarding a burglary at a house in Burari, his fourth call of the day. Without wasting time, he cleaned his camera lenses, placed the DSLR in his camera bag, wore a face mask and rushed along with three forensic experts to the spot, almost an hour away, in a police vehicle.

Realising that the narrow lanes and uneven roads leading to the crime spot might delay them, and result in tampering of evidence, Sharma along with the forensic team quickly got off the vehicle and boarded an auto.

"Any delay in reaching the crime scene leads to the risk of the spot losing its originality... In burglary or murder cases, fingerprints or blood stains, which are crucial evidence, tend to fade away with time and possible hair strands too disappear if the spot is not inspected quickly," the head constable told *The Indian Express* during the assignment.

Part of Delhi Police's district crime teams, Sharma is among the over 50 photographers who are the first responders at any crime scene in the city and form an important part of the evidence collection chain. Each of Delhi Police's 15 districts consists of a crime team, which includes at least three crime scene photographers, a fingerprint expert and two forensic experts.

Recalling an incident where a photograph helped crack a blind murder case, Sharma said: "Two years ago, in April, we received a call regarding the stabbing of a 26-year-old woman inside her house in Kamal Vihar. The room of the house was locked and there was no visible break-in or any exit route that the accused could have taken... I started clicking pictures of the multiple stab wounds while forensic experts scoured through any possible evidence or fingerprints. While checking pictures of the house, I stumbled on a set of bloody footprints right outside the room's door in one frame, which was then measured and corroborated by the forensic team and helped nab the woman's husband."

Constable Monu Yadav, posted as a photographer with the Shahdara district's crime team for over a year now, recounts his tenure as a crime scene photographer: "I have clicked hundreds of photographs — from burnt, mangled and bullet-ridden bodies to high-profile burglaries and building collapses. We receive at least four-five calls a day and it has become a routine affair for us to witness the dead from up close... Our photographs give the court a pictorial representation of the crime spot, how the crime possibly took place and who might be the accused."

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> CONSTABLE & PHOTOGRAPHER

Yadav said clicking photos of a crime spot includes getting every aspect of the crime, which sometimes even investigating officers (IOs) fail to detect. "Suppose a person has been shot or stabbed multiple times, I have to take crystal clear photos of the type of wound or the injury sustained, the angle and the distance from which the weapon might have been used on the person and the type of weapon used by the accused... These help the investigating officer to get a rough idea on the number of accused involved and the route taken by them while fleeing the spot," he said.

Apart from their cameras, police photographers are armed with another essential tool in their kit — a measuring tape. "In cases of suicides by hanging, we usually have to submit photographs along with measurement of the height between the body and the floor... In cases of suicide by jumping, we click photographs and measure the distance from the place the person jumped off from and the landing spot so that police get a rough idea about the build of the deceased; it also helps them recreate the crime scene," Yadav said.

In cases where there is a possibility of a fingerprint or a footmark on a surface, photographers ask forensic experts to use a magnetic or fluorescent powder on it which makes the marks more visible and clearer for clicking photographs.

Photographers also play a crucial role at court proceedings during the trial of a case, where they are subjected to cross-questioning on the pictures clicked. Said sub-Inspector Naresh Kumar, now in-charge of Central district's crime team, who worked as a photographer from 2003 to 2008, "We are called to the court several times during trial for corroborating photographic evidence... We are questioned about the photos we took at the crime scene, what we saw at the spot as we were the first ones to get there... This helps police build a water-tight case in court."

He added that they are often called by IOs to take photographs during the post-mortem of a body. Constable Deepak Saini, another photographer attached with the North district, said crowds gathering at the scene of crime or an accident poses problems. Referring to cases of suicides at Signature or Wazirabad bridge, he said huge crowds often gather around the spot both during the rescue operation and once the body is recovered. "Clicking photographs in such instances becomes difficult as the crowd tampers with the spot," Saini said.

Among the several challenges faced by them during assignments, Sharma said responding to a call regarding a murder inside a guest house in Kashmere Gate last May proved to be the toughest. "It was a very warm day and we somehow managed to break open the door of the room where the body of the man was lying decomposed for two days... I remember going out of the room every five minutes to catch my breath as the room was so suffocating, before taking multiple shots of the deceased," he said.

While clicking the dead day in and out has become a normal affair for these police photographers, some incidents do end up affecting their personal lives, they say.

Said Yadav, "I was attending a call regarding the murder of a teenage girl in Ranjit Nagar in 2019. Her throat was brutally slit open… It was a horrific sight to see a life so young suddenly cut short. I kept thinking about it for weeks and the memory of it still haunts me whenever I go to a crime scene."

Dr Bhavuk Garg, Associate Professor, Psychiatry department, Lady Hardinge Medical College, said regularly covering crime spots, especially heinous ones, often leads to anxiety-related issues for both police personnel and photographers. "Studies show that while it doesn't necessarily lead to a specific psychiatric disorder, it often causes secondary traumatic stress (STS) which has symptoms like anxiety and constantly thinking about a particular traumatic episode," he said.

For Sharma, dealing with the dead has become regular business where emotions take a back seat: "Initially it was tough to process the things I saw while on an assignment but now I have become immune to murders, however brutal they may be, as it has become a part of my job."

Deepa Verma, Director of the Forensic Science Laboratory, Rohini, said that often, witnesses do not remember clear details about a crime and tend to forget minute details with time. "Photographs help in such cases as it is a permanent record of the incident, which provides courts a clearer view of the crime scene apart from the oral testimonies and helps in conviction," she said.



Head constable Ajay Sharma takes photos of a house in Burari where a burglary was reported. *Photos: Arnabjit Sur*